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Emile Zola

A PRIEST IN THE HOUSE

Translated from the French by
BRIAN RHYS



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INTRODUCTION

Gossip, mother of wit, is a vivacious thing in France. It has salted town life through centuries and thrived with a bonny impartiality on injustice, calamity, queerness and feasting. And gossip it is which gives such life and freshness to this novel. Well it might. For the reader, leaning invisibly out of an upper window and listening with Abbé Faujas to Mouret's lively account of the people of Plassans, soon realizes that this is no ordinary town; everyone in it is a knave, a fool, a viper, or afflicted with some unhappy taint. Not even that pleasant young priest Abbé Surin escapes Zola's malevolence; his attractiveness is definitely homosexual.

The reader who has already breathed the steaming air of Zola's Paris, or walked in wonder past the cowshed in *La Terre*, might ask whether the canvas of a provincial town is broad enough for Zola's genius; what else has he to offer in this little-known novel? The answer is unexpected: it is subtlety, ambiguity of character, a comedy of manners sprinkled with wit, where caricature and satire are impure, impregnated with a personal, veiled ferocity; added to this too, low comedy blending, to crown all, with pure and powerful melodrama. Indeed, ingredients and intentions are so well mixed here by a cunning hand that any summary of the story is likely to be false—as false as the central character Abbé Faujas, whose name is compounded of *faux* and *goujat*. And after the opening chapters, the subtlety becomes all-pervading; it keeps the reader alert continually, lurking in half-sentences, now trivial, now sinister, foreshadowing with virtuosity, and proving how completely the story was organized before writing began. And as subtlety and malice are not unappreciated in France, *La Conquête de Plassans* has been well-placed among Rougon-Macquart novels.

The wider setting, then, is the town of Plassans, the story entwines the career and end of the priest with the fall of the house of Mouret, home of a peaceful bourgeois family. Disruption germinates the latent seeds of insanity in both husband and wife. Let us not

...an, however, if the heredity bee in Zola's bonnet thus gives a two-fold sting to the unhappy Mourets, for Zola is always generous; he likes to give us double value for our money. And the melodramatic outcome is told with that haunting, compelling power which the French describe as *hallucinoire*.

The town of Plassans is Aix-en-Provence, where Zola passed the formative years of his boyhood. His father was the engineer assigned the important task of improving the town's water-supply. While work was in progress he died suddenly, leaving the mother and only son to fight a grinding down-hill battle with poverty, ten humiliating years from which they retreated in defeat to Paris when Zola was seventeen. From this experience comes not only dear-bought experience of the sliding-scale of social values, useful to the novelist, but resentment and hatred for the bourgeois outlook. This story is his revenge.

Young Zola's escape from back-streets lay in the country round Aix where, on the hot slopes among white rocks and myrtle, peasants pursued their loves. From this came the arcadian sensual view of sex which Zola carried away, with the romantic poets, to Paris. More wretchedness followed, then a submerged period passed over in silence in the days before Freud's influence informed criticism with more penetrating insight. Zola's brief association in beggary with a young prostitute is now seen as an idealistic attempt to retrieve a victim of the town from dissolution. Ending as it did in abject failure, the episode was bound to have a deep effect on the whole outlook of the man whom Edmond de Goncourt found "unhealthy and hypochondriac" at their first meeting. But by then the bourgeois virtue of industry, certainly dinned into Zola by his mother, had already regained control; ambition had set to work. Conflicts and fantasies were gradually being forged into the intense naturalistic vision of the writer, to be finally resolved in the "black poetry" of *La Terre*. But in all Zola's novels, as his most understanding critic has pointed out,* promiscuity is associated with madness, murder, suicide, decay. And in this novel concerned with adolescent memories, sex is quite displaced; Marthe's passionate declaration to the priest is the voice of madness. It is in *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret*, the novel following next on this, that Zola develops his arcadian approach to love, and though to contemporary taste the story may seem sub-tropical and lush, in France it is the preferred among Zola's novels for those without stomach for brutishness. We are in

* Zola. Angus Wilson.

an early intermediate period, then, with these two novels. Behind already lay the hugeovercharged experiment of *Le Ventre de Paris*, which certainly had given Zola something to digest. Only three years ahead (1877) lies the resounding *succès de scandale* of *l'Assommoir*.

If an English novelist of the 'seventies had been so bold as to propose paying off old scores with a god-fearing provincial town, he would have been very promptly extinguished by any London publisher. But in France "staggering the bourgeois" was already an accepted counter in the literary game, and the attack was also spreading into the field of painting, activated in part by the pen of Zola the journalist. But in many a town like Aix, French families were far from such open cleavages as this novel might suggest; surface hostility to Zola would be solid. On the other hand, the French are by nature avid of new sensation, and we may guess that copies of this novel gradually crept into the backs of drawers in various houses of the town, and not only through such slimy hands as those of the Troupes.

But the genesis of this novel, its motives, would surely be extraordinary in any country, so, taking cover in ambiguity, Zola has to blend a kind of satire of his townsfolk with a kind of tragedy in the house of the Mourets—a tricky problem in mixed effects. For Marthe is intended to be a serious study of a womanly nature cruelly travestied under the effects of religious mania. There is one moment, for instance, as she lies foredone in the coach on the road to Les Tulettes, with Rose chiding over her, when we seem to hear the true accents of tragedy. But Zola solves the problem by making Fate as cruelly malicious with Marthe as he is slyly malicious with the townsfolk. Ferocity reigns supreme. And Marthe is not too deeply studied; she is a type of womanhood seen from without, not within—her girlhood through the eyes of the priest. Her husband too is a type, a bourgeois with a brain lesion added, but he is vividly propelled through his daily movements, and warmed to humanity by his suffering, which his wife is not.

For Madame Rougon, mellowed here by success, Zola reserves his subtlest malice and a fine stroke of irony which he passes over in almost complete silence. For it is she, the most astute woman in Plassans, who for worldly ends hands her only daughter over to be moulded like wax and broken. "I'm fonder of your daughter than you are," says that ruffian Macquart to her, towards the end. The remark seems fantastic and is hardly noticed, yet it has several grains of truth. For at least Macquart has mistrusted the priest on

ple; and when, at Les Tulettes, he sees the hopeless plight of the and suddenly decides to hasten her end, there is a grim well-hidden pity for her in his savage evening of blackmail.

Among the lesser characters we move with pleasure, choosing between wit and charm, vinegar, vulgarity and ferocity. And if the talkers seem quite at home in this strange town, it is because Zola can so admirably convey the atmosphere of a conversation, its easy winding course under the ardent sun of a Provençal afternoon. The wit, of course, is imported from Paris, also much, we may suspect, of Madame de Condamin's charm, for Madame Charpentier, the wife of Zola's publisher, also dressed well and knew how to secure a ribbon or two for her husband's friends.

Very much at home at Les Tulettes is uncle Macquart. When he lays the plump body of a pullet on the stone altar in front of his house he is quite irresistible. And as he devoutly sips his little wine, we remember with respect the illustrious death in store for him in *Le Docteur Pascal*—as pretty a case of spontaneous combustion by alcoholism as any doctor could remember.

Dickens and Zola both published their novels first in serial form, and there is a temptation for the writer to introduce fresh characters if the interest of instalment readers is flagging. So Sam Weller was born. But Zola planned his novels completely beforehand, and the late arrival here of low comedy in the persons of the Trouches is not an afterthought. They had a definite part assigned in the flamboyant finish to the story, which is entirely Zolaesque.

Feeling no doubt the enormity of his conception of Abbé Faujas—equivocal through and through, with a worm at the heart of his ambition—Zola has lent him something of himself: the shabby beginning, the will to conquer the town, the domestic life between women. Faujas at table, fed on choice morsels, "with his thoughts elsewhere", is Zola sitting opposite Alexandrine and his mother. And further, there is a tantalizing question that is raised by the priest's discomfiture on his first appearance in the green *salon*. The scene has a vivid quality about it that is quite nightmarish, and so many other characters in the story have a past that this seems to be an obsession with the author. Now, years later, at the time of the Dreyfus affair, Zola's adversaries raked up publicly some questionable details in the early life of his own father. Is it possible that the engineer had an enemy at Aix—a Madame Paloque, say, with an inquisitive mind and a malicious tongue? That the widow or schoolboy had been taunted?

Into the last working hour of the priest Zola also enters, but Faujas' end is an empty terror, a fiery sacrifice to the false and unnamed god of melodrama, without any ultimate significance whatever. Readers are hypnotised by this holocaust, not so the practised chatterers of Plassans. Their thoughts waver as the flames. Tomorrow Faujas will be a legend; gossip fattens and thrives for ever.

BRIAN RHYS

CHAPTER ONE

DÉSIRÉE clapped her hands. She was fourteen years old and a big girl for her age, but she laughed now like a little thing of five.

"Mummy, Mummy," she cried. "Look at my dolly!"

For a quarter of an hour she had been trying to make a doll out of a piece of cloth taken from her mother; she had made a roll of it and tightened one end with some turns of thread. Marthe looked up from the stocking that she was mending with an embroiderer's deftness. She smiled.

"But that's only a piccaninny," she said. "Here, make a proper doll. She ought to have a skirt, you know, like a lady."

Rummaging in her work-table, she found a strip of patterned material which she gave to Désirée, then went on with her careful mending. They were sitting together at one end of the little terrace, the girl on a stool at her mother's feet. The setting sun, still a warm September sun, bathed them in tranquil light, while the garden below them dreamed, already grey in shadow. No sound rose outside, in this deserted part of the town.

For quite ten minutes they went on with their work in silence, Désirée doing her utmost to make a skirt for her doll. Marthe looked down at the child now and then, fondly and a little sadly. Then, seeing how bothered she was, she said:

"Just a moment, I'll put on two arms for you."

As she was taking the doll, two tall lads of seventeen and eighteen came along the terrace. They gave Marthe a kiss.

"Don't scold us, mother," said Octave gaily. "I took Serge off to hear the band play. What a crowd there was!"

"I thought you had been kept late at school," murmured his mother, "or else I should have been quite uneasy."

But Désirée, forgetting all about her doll, swung her arms round Serge's neck and cried:

"One of my birds has escaped—the blue one you gave me."

She was on the verge of tears. Her mother, who thought she had forgotten about this loss, tried in vain to turn her thoughts by showing her the doll. But Désirée held on to her brother's arm and began pulling him down into the garden.

"Come and see, come and see," she kept saying.

Serge, gently humouring her, followed with consoling words.

She led him to a little greenhouse with a cage on a stand outside. And there she told him how the bird had flown out just as she was opening the door to stop it fighting with another one.

"Well, it doesn't surprise me," exclaimed Octave, who had taken a seat on the terrace rail. "She's always handling them; she wants to see how they're made and what they've got in their throats that makes them sing. The other day she was carrying them around for a whole afternoon in her pockets to keep them nice and warm."

"Octave!" said Marthe reproachfully. "Don't upset the poor child."

But Désirée hadn't heard. She was telling Serge at great length how the bird had come to fly away.

"You see, it sort of slipped out, then it went off a little way and perched on Monsieur Rastoil's big pear tree. And then it hopped off on to the plum-tree at the end of the garden. Then it flew back over my head and got into the tall trees in the garden of Government House, and after that I couldn't see it any more."

Tears were coming in her eyes.

"Perhaps it will come back," Serge suggested.

"Do you think so? Then I'd like to put the others in a box and leave the cage open all night."

Octave couldn't help laughing; but Marthe called Désirée to her.

"Just come and see what I've got here."

And she showed her the doll. The doll was lovely; it had a stiff skirt, a head made out of a round wad, and arms of selvedge tacked on to the shoulders. Désirée's face lit with sudden delight. She sat down again on her stool, forgetting all about the bird, and began kissing the doll and nursing it in her arms like a little child.

Serge had returned and was leaning on the rail beside his brother. Marthe had taken up her mending again.

"So did the band play?" she asked.

"It plays every Thursday," answered Octave. "What a pity you don't come too, mother. The whole town's there: the Rastoil girls, Madame de Condamin, Monsieur Paloque

and the mayor's wife and daughter. Why don't you come?" Marthe did not look up. She murmured, as she finished a mend: "You know very well, boys, that I'm not fond of going out. It's so peaceful here. Then someone must be with Désirée."

Octave was about to speak, but he glanced at his sister and said nothing. He stood there whistling softly, looking up at the trees in Government House garden, loud with the bed-time chorus of sparrows, then cast an eye over Monsieur Rastöil's pear-trees with the sun setting behind them. Serge was deep in a book which he had taken out of his pocket. Silence brooded, warm with unspoken affection, in the mellow light of the sun which was paling gradually on the terrace. Marthe, with a mother's eyes for her three children, was plying her needle with long regular stitches.

"Why is everybody late today?" she said, after a few moments. "It's nearly ten and your father's not home yet. I think he went off to Les Tulettes."

"Ah, in that case there's no need to be surprised," said Octave. "The peasants there are in no hurry to let go, once they've got him. Did he go there to buy up wine?"

"I can't say," said Marthe. "You know he doesn't like talking about his affairs."

Silence again fell. The dining-room window opened wide on to the terrace, and old Rose was now busy inside laying the table with an angry rattle of plates and cutlery. She seemed in a very bad temper, pushing chairs about and grumbling to herself in disjointed remarks. Then she went and stood at the front door, and craned her neck for a view down the road towards Government Square. After waiting there a few minutes, she came out on to the terrace and called:

"Monsieur Mouret won't be back for dinner, then?"

"Yes, Rose, wait," said Marthe quietly.

"But everything's burning. There's no sense to it. When the master's up to these tricks, he ought to warn. Not that I care, anyway. The dinner won't be worth eating."

"Do you think so, Rose?" said a quiet voice behind her. "I expect we'll manage to eat your dinner all the same."

It was Mouret, just arriving. Rose turned round and looked her master in the face, as if on the point of bursting out. But when she saw the complete calm of that face, with its faint suggestion of sturdy mockery, she hadn't a word to say and made off. Mouret stepped down on to the terrace where he walked about without

down. And all that he did was to give a friendly little tap with the tips of his fingers to Désirée, who smiled back at him. Marthe looked up and, after glancing at her husband, began moving her things away in the work-table.

"Tired, father?" asked Octave, who saw that his father's boots were white with dust.

"Just a little," answered Mouret, and that was all he had to say about his long journey on foot.

But then he noticed a spade and a rake lying in the middle of the garden, which the children must have left there.

"Why aren't the tools brought in?" he exclaimed. "I've spoken about it dozens of times. If it chanced to rain, they'd rust."

But his annoyance ended there. He went down into the garden himself, collected the spade and rake, and hung them up carefully at the back of the little greenhouse. As he stepped up again on to the terrace, his eyes were busy scanning every nook along the paths to make sure that everything was as it should be.

"Learning your lessons, eh?" he asked as he passed Serge, still deep in his book.

"No, dad," the boy answered, "it's a book that Abbé Bourrette lent me, about *Missions in China*."

Mouret stopped short in front of his wife.

"By the way," he said, "has anyone called?"

"No, nobody, dear," said Marthe in a surprised tone.

Mouret was about to continue but he thought better of it. He tramped up and down a little longer without a word, then moving towards the steps he called:

"Well, Rose, what about that burnt dinner?"

"Ah, sakes now!" cook's furious voice came back down the passage. "There's nothing at all ready yet; it's all cold. You'll have to wait, monsieur."

Mouret laughed noiselessly and winked his left eye at his wife and children. He seemed much entertained by Rose's exhibition of temper. And after that he became lost in contemplation of his neighbour's fruit-trees.

"You'd hardly believe it," he muttered. "Monsieur Rastoin's pears this year are splendid."

Marthe, who had been feeling slightly uneasy, seemed to have a question on the tip of her tongue. She decided to speak, and asked timidly:

"Were you expecting someone today, dear?"

"Yes and no," he replied, beginning to walk up and down.

"You've let the second floor, maybe?"

"Yes, I have."

And, as an awkward silence fell, he went on in his quiet voice: "Before starting for Les Tulettes this morning, I went to see Abbé Bourrette. He was very pressing, so—well there! I settled with him. I know you don't like the idea, but, come to think of it, it isn't very reasonable of you, dear. The second floor is no use to us; it's going to rack and ruin. The fruit we're storing in the rooms encourages damp and the wallpaper's peeling. And now that I think of it, don't forget to have the fruit removed tomorrow: our tenant may be coming any time."

"But we're so comfortable by ourselves in our house!" Marthe ventured to say in a low voice.

"Come, we shan't be bothered by a priest. He'll have his place and we'll have ours. They're quite harmless, why, they'd hide to drink a glass of water. You know what I think about them—good-for-nothing lot, most of them. Well, what decided me was just that I happened to tumble on one! There's no worry about money with them, and you don't even hear their key turn in the lock."

Marthe still felt sore at heart. She looked about her—at the happy house, bathed in the last light of the sun, and the garden, where the shadows were growing deeper; she looked at her children, all her happiness enfolded here, in this little space.

"And do you know what this priest is like?" she went on.

"No, but the rector took the rooms in his name, and that's good enough. The rector's a good fellow. I know that our tenant's name is Faujas, Abbé Faujas, and that he comes from the diocese of Besançon. I suppose he couldn't get on with his parish priest, so he was appointed curate here, at St. Saturnin. Perhaps he knows our bishop. But of course that's neither here nor there for us. I trust the rector."

However, Marthe was not convinced. She stood up to her husband, which did not often happen with her.

"You're right," she said, after a moment's silence: "Abbé Bourrette's a good man. Only I remember, when he came to see the rooms, that he told me he didn't know the name of the person on whose behalf he was taking them. It's one of those favours that priests do for each other, between one town and another. But I really think you might have written to Besançon for information, to find out who you're letting into your house."

Mouret had no desire to get angry; he laughed indulgently. You don't think he's a devil, do you? There you are, all of a tremble. I didn't know you were as superstitious as that. Surely you don't think that priests bring bad luck, as some say? It's true they don't bring good luck either. They're just like other men. You wait and see, when the priest comes, whether his cassock frightens me."

"I'm not superstitious, you know I'm not," murmured Marthe. "But there it is, I can't help feeling unhappy about the idea."

He took his stand in front of her, and cut her short with a sharp gesture. "Now that's quite enough. I've let the rooms, so don't let's say any more." Then, with the bantering tone of a man of affairs who thinks he has made a good bargain, he added: "What's more I've let for one hundred and fifty francs, so that's another hundred and fifty a year coming in for the house."

Marthe was looking down; her only protest now was the slight sway of her hands; she gently closed her eyes as if to check the tear brimming under her eyelids. Furtively she glanced at the children, who did not appear to have overheard her argument with her husband; no doubt they were used to this sort of scene which Mouret with his lively bantering ways rather enjoyed.

"If you'd like to eat, dinner's ready now," said Rose in her surly voice, as she stepped out on to the terrace.

"Good; come along, children, to table!" gaily cried Mouret, who did not seem to harbour the slightest resentment.

The family got up. And then Désirée, quiet and solemn till now, poor innocent, felt her grief suddenly stir again as she saw them all moving. She put her arms round her father's neck and stammered:

"Daddy, one of my birds has flown away."

"A bird, darling? We'll catch it again."

And he petted her, becoming quite fond. But he too had to go and see the cage.

When he came back with the child, Marthe and the two boys were already in the dining-room. The last rays of the sun, streaming through the window, shone cheerfully on the white tablecloth, the plates and the children's mugs. There was a subdued glow in the room, with a green shadow from the garden outside.

And as Marthe, herself again in this peaceful atmosphere, smilingly lifted the cover of the soup tureen, a noise was heard in the passage. In rushed Rose in a flutter, and stammered out:

"Monsieur l'abbé Faujas is at the door."

CHAPTER TWO

MOURET's gesture showed some annoyance. He wasn't really expecting his tenant till the next day at the earliest. And as he started up from his chair Abbé Faujas appeared at the door in the corridor. He was a tall, strongly-built man with a square-cut face, broad features and a greyish unhealthy complexion. Behind him in his shadow stood an elderly woman who was astonishingly like him, though smaller and rougher-looking. When they saw that the family was at dinner, they both hesitated and stepped back discreetly, without retreating however. The priest's tall dark figure stood out mournfully against the bright background of the whitewashed wall.

"We apologize for disturbing you," he said to Mouret. "We've come from monsieur l'abbé Bourrette's house; he must have told you we were——"

"Certainly not!" Mouret exclaimed. "This is just like Abbé Bourrette: always up in the clouds. Only this morning he assured me you would not be coming for another two days. Oh well, we shall just have to let you move in."

Abbé Faujas offered his apologies. His voice, grave in tone, sounded very gentle in the cadence of each sentence. He was very sorry to arrive at such an awkward moment. Having expressed his regrets briefly, in ten well-chosen words, he turned to pay the porter who had brought his box. His hands were well-shaped but heavy; from a fold in his cassock he drew a purse, though only the steel rings were visible. He felt in it, probing carefully with his finger-tips, head bent down. Then a coin passed without being seen, and the porter went his way. Again the priest spoke in his polite voice:

"Now please, monsieur, sit down again to your meal. Your servant will show us to our rooms. She can help me to carry this upstairs."

He bent down to take one handle of the box; it was a small wooden one, strengthened with metal bands and corners; one side

seemed to have been repaired with a batten of deal. Mouret stood here, surprised, looking round for more luggage, but all that he could see was a large basket which the old lady was holding against her skirt with both hands, unwilling to put it down, tired though she was. The cover of the basket was up, and peeping out among the folded things was the end of a comb wrapped in paper, and the neck of a wine-bottle not very firmly corked.

"No, no, leave this," said Mouret, giving the box a little shove with his foot. "It can't be very heavy; Rose will easily manage it herself."

No doubt he was unconscious of the private disdain revealed in his words. The old lady stared at him with her dark eyes, then turned again to the dining-room and the table with the dinner, which she had been scrutinizing since her arrival. Her lips pursed as her eyes moved from one thing to the next. So far she had not spoken a word.

Meanwhile Abbé Faujas agreed to leave the box. In the yellow-grained sunlight streaming through the garden door, his shabby cassock seemed quite red; along the hems ran a little pattern of mending. It was very clean, but so thin, so poor, that Marthe, who so far had remained sitting in a kind of uneasy reserve, now rose in her turn. The priest who as yet had only given her one glance, quickly averted, noticed that she was getting up, though he did not seem to be looking at her at all.

"Please, please, don't move; we should be sorry to disturb you at table."

"Oh, very well, then," said Mouret, who was hungry. "Rose will show you up. Ask her for anything you need. Make yourselves at home."

But as Abbé Faujas, with a bow, turned to go upstairs, Marthe went to her husband and whispered:

"But you're forgetting, dear . . ."

"What?" he asked, seeing her hesitate.

"Why, the fruit."

"Ah, the dickens, of course, there's the fruit up there!" he said in consternation.

Abbé Faujas turned round with a questioning look.

"I am really very sorry, monsieur," Mouret continued. "Abbé Bourrette is certainly a most worthy man, but it's a pity that you asked him to help you. He hasn't two grains of sense. If we had known, we should have had everything ready. But as it happens, we

shall have to move some things out. We've been using the rooms, you see. There's our store of fruit upstairs covering the floors—figs, apples, grapes."

The priest heard these words with a surprise which even his politeness could not conceal.

"Oh, but it won't take long," Mouret continued. "Only ten minutes, if you will be good enough to wait, and Rose will clear the rooms for you."

A look of extreme concern passed over the priest's colourless face.

"The rooms are furnished, aren't they?"

"Not at all; there isn't a stick of furniture. We've never used the rooms ourselves."

On this, the priest lost countenance; an angry flash lit his grey eyes. His voice, though held in check, was rising:

"What! why, I clearly asked in my letter for furnished rooms. I could hardly bring furniture in my box, could I?"

"There you are! what did I say?" cried Mouret, still louder. "Bourrette's amazing. He called here, monsieur, and of course he saw the apples; why, he even took one in his hand and said he hadn't often seen their equal. Everything seemed very suitable, he said, it was just what he wanted, and he was taking the rooms."

But Abbé Faujas had stopped listening; a wave of anger flushed his cheeks. He turned and stammered in an anxious voice:

"You hear that, mother? There's no furniture."

The old lady, wrapped in her thin black shawl, had just been taking a survey of the ground floor with little furtive steps, still clutching her basket. She had got as far as the kitchen door and inspected the four walls; then, returning to the terrace, her eyes had slowly taken stock of the garden. But it was the dining-room which interested her most; once more she was standing there, gazing at the spread of things on the table, watching the steam rise from the soup, when again her son spoke to her:

"Do you hear that, mother? We shall have to go to an hotel."

She looked up at him but made no answer. Her whole face said "no" to leaving this house, where she already knew almost every nook and corner. She gave the lightest shrug of her shoulders, her eyes uncertain, still roving from kitchen to garden, from garden to dining-room.

But Mouret meanwhile was growing impatient. Seeing that neither mother nor son could make up their minds to be gone, he said:

"Unfortunately we've got no beds, you see. Up in the loft there is a camp bed which madame could perhaps manage with for one night; but I really don't see where we could find a bed for you, monsieur."

At last Madame Faujas opened her lips. Her words were clipped, her tone slightly hoarse:

"My son can have the camp bed. A mattress on the floor will do for me, in a corner."

The priest agreed to this proposal with a nod. Mouret was about to protest and think of some other plan; but seeing that his new tenants looked satisfied, he made no further comment, merely exchanging a look of surprise with his wife.

"Tomorrow there it will be daylight," he said with a tinge of robust irony in his voice; "you can furnish the place as you like. Rose shall go up now, clear away the fruit and make the beds. Will you wait a moment on the terrace. Come, children, bring out two chairs."

All this time the children had been quietly sitting at table, looking curiously at the priest and his mother. Abbé Faujas had not appeared to notice them, but the old lady had let her eyes rest a moment on each in turn, as if to probe deep into these young faces. When their father spoke, all three began bustling and brought out chairs.

The old lady did not sit down. Mouret turned, as he could no longer see her, and discovered her standing at one of the partly open windows of the drawing-room. She was craning her neck, completing her view of the premises, with all the calm of someone going over a house offered for sale. As Rose lifted the box, she came back into the hall, and simply said:

"I'll go up and help her." And up the stairs she went, following the servant. The priest didn't even look round. He was smiling at the three children standing in front of him. His face, when he wished, could wear a very gentle expression in spite of the sternness of his brow and the harsh lines of his mouth.

"And are they your whole family, madame?" he asked Marthe, who had drawn near.

"Yes, monsieur," she answered, feeling constrained under the clear gaze of his eyes.

But he was again looking at the children, and continued:

"Two tall fellows you have here; they'll be men soon. Have you done with your schooling, laddy?"

He was speaking to Serge. Mouret broke in and spoke for his son.

"Yes, this one has, though he's the younger. When I say that he's finished, I mean that he has matriculated, for he's gone back to school for a year in the sixth; he's the bookish one of the family. This one, the eldest, is just a booby, not up to much, eh? Twice he's failed his matric, and a scamp at that, always up to tricks."

Octave listened to this criticism with a smile, while praise made Serge look down. Faujas appeared to be studying them for another moment silently; then, passing on to Désirée and speaking in his gentler way, he asked:

"And may I be your friend?"

Désirée did not answer; very shy, she went and hid her face against her mother's shoulder, and Marthe, instead of showing her face, drew her closer, putting an arm round her waist.

"Forgive her," she said, rather sadly. "She's a little weak in the head, she's still a little girl—an innocent. We don't bother her with learning. She's fourteen, and all that she knows is to be fond of animals."

Désirée felt braver for her mother's caress; she turned her head and smiled, then spoke up boldly:

"Yes, you can be my friend. . . . Only, tell me, you never hurt flies, do you?" And then as there was general amusement, she added gravely: "Octave kills flies. That's not right."

Abbé Faujas had taken a seat. He seemed very weary. He ought ease for a few moments in the warmth and peace of the errace, and let his eyes travel slowly over the garden and the neighbouring trees. The peace and quietness of this little place in a country town surprised him rather. Dark patches appeared on his face.

"How nice it is here," he murmured.

Then he remained silent, as though lost in his thoughts. He gave a little start when Mouret spoke to him with a laugh:

"And now, if you don't mind, monsieur l'abbé, we'll be sitting down to table." And at a glance from his wife he added:

"You must follow our example, and accept a plateful of soup, when you won't have to go to the hotel for your dinner. Now please as you will."

"It's very kind of you, but we don't require anything, thank you," the priest answered in a tone of extreme politeness which ruled out any further invitation.

So then the Mourets returned to the dining-room and sat down at the table. Marthe helped them to soup. Soon there was a cheerful clatter of spoons. The children chattered, Désirée laughed brightly as she listened to a story told by her father, who was delighted to be eating at last. Meanwhile Abbé Faujas, forgotten by the family, stayed quite still in his chair on the terrace, watching the setting sun. He did not turn his head; he did not seem to hear. As the sun went down, he took his hat from his head, feeling too hot, no doubt. Marthe, sitting by the window, could see his large head, bared, with short hair already turning grey at the temples. One of the last red rays shone on this rugged soldier-like head, where the tonsure seemed like a wound dealt by some club; then the light went, and the priest, now in shadow, was only a dark figure outlined against the ashy grey of the twilight.

As she did not wish to call Rose, Marthe herself went for a lamp and served the first course. As she was coming back from the kitchen, she encountered a woman at the foot of the stairs whom she did not recognize at first. It was Madame Faujas. She had put on a turbar cap and looked like a servant in her cotton dress, with a yellow wrap drawn tight across the blouse and tied behind at the waist. Her wrists were still bare and, still out of breath after her work upstairs, she thumped her heavy laced boots on the tiled floor of the corridor.

"So that's done, isn't it?" Marthe said to her with a smile.

"Oh, it was nothing," she answered. "It was knocked off in no time."

She stepped on to the terrace, and said, softening her voice:

"Ovid, son, will you come upstairs now. All is ready."

She had to touch her son on the shoulder to rouse him from his reverie. The air was growing cooler. He shivered, and followed her without a word. As he passed by the door of the dining-room looking white in the bright light of the lamp, and loud with the children's chatter, he bent his head forward to say in his musical voice:

"May I thank you again and apologize for all this trouble. We're really very sorry."

"Not at all, not at all!" cried Mouret. "It's for us to be here, we can't make you more comfortable for the night."

The priest bowed, and again Marthe met that clear eagle gaze which had thrilled her. It seemed as though a flame had suddenly passed within those eyes of an ordinary dull grey, like

lamp that moves behind the window glass when a house-front is asleep.

"It doesn't look as though the priest was shy," said Mouret in a mocking tone, when mother and son were gone.

"I don't think life's easy for them," murmured Marthe.

"Well, he certainly hasn't brought a gold-mine in that box of his. What a weight! I could have lifted it with my little finger." But his chat was interrupted by the reappearance of Rose, who had just run downstairs to bring news of the wonders she had seen.

"Well!" said she, coming to a halt before the table where her master and mistress were eating, "there's a tough one! The lady must be sixty-five at least, and you'd hardly know it! She pushes you round and works like a horse."

"Did she help you to clear the fruit away?" asked Mouret with curiosity.

"I should just think she did. Carrying the fruits like that, she was, in her apron; loads fit to burst. 'That's done for her dress, sure,' I said to myself. But not a bit of it; good solid stuff there, same as I wear meself. We had to make more than ten trips. My arms were all of an achè. And there she was grumbling and saying 'was slow. I believe I heard her swearing, if you'll excuse me saying so.'"

Mouret seemed very amused.

"And the beds?" he asked.

"The beds? She made them. You should see her turning a mattress. They're no weight, believe me. Well, she takes it at one end, tosses it up and over like a feather. And very careful at that, too. She tucked in the camp bed as if it had been a child's cot. If she'd been putting the child Jesus to bed, she couldn't have smoothed those sheets with more devotion. Out of four blankets, she put three on the camp bed. And the same with the pillows! She wouldn't take one for herself; her son's got them both."

"So she's going to sleep on the floor?"

"In a corner, like a dog. She threw a mattress down on the floor in the other room, saying she would sleep there better than in Paradise. It was no good trying to make her manage more comfortably for herself. She says she's never cold, and her head's too hard to mind a tiled floor. I gave them water and sugar as mistress said, and that's that. Anyway, they're a queer pair."

Rose served the rest of their dinner. The Mourets that evening sat longer than usual over their food. They talked at great length

about their new tenants. In their clockwork existence, the arrival of these two strangers was quite an event. They discussed it as if it had been some disaster, with all the petty details that help to pass long evening hours in the country. Mouret especially enjoyed the small talk of a little town. Over dessert, elbows on table, in the warmth of the dining-room, with the satisfied air of a contented man, he said again and again:

"Well, I can't say Besançon is making much of a present to Plassans. Did you see the back of his cassock, when he turned round? If the pious ladies run after that one I should be very surprised. He's too threadbare; the ladies like them handsomer than that."

"He has a gentle voice," said Marthe, who was lenient.

"Not when his temper rises, anyway," said Mouret. "Didn't you hear him working himself up, then, when he heard the rooms weren't furnished? He's a rough man. No dawdling in the confession for him! I should very much like to know what sort of furnishing he does tomorrow. Let's hope he pays me, anyway. If it comes to that, I can always see Monsieur Bourrette; he's my man."

They were not a religious family. Even the children were making fun of the priest and his mother. Octave mimicked the old lady craning her neck to peep inside the rooms, and made Désirée laugh. Serge, more serious-minded, defended the "poor things".

As a rule, at ten exactly if he wasn't playing a hand at picquet Mouret took his candle and went off to bed; but that evening eleven came and still he held out against sleep. Désirée had at last dropped off, her head on her mother's lap. The two boys had gone up to their rooms. But Mouret, alone with his wife, chatted on.

"How old would you say he was?" he suddenly asked.

"Who?" said Marthe, for she too was getting sleepy.

"The priest, of course! What do you say? Forty to forty-five; eh? A fine figure of a man. Pity he wears the cassock! He would have made a grand carabineer."

Then, after a pause, talking to himself, voicing thoughts busy in his head:

"They arrived by the train at a quarter to seven. So they only had time to call at Abbé Bourrette's house before coming on here. I bet they've had no dinner. It's obvious. We should have seen them going out to the hotel. I'd very much like to know where they could have had any supper."

Rose was in the room. She had been moving round for a few

moments, waiting for master and mistress to go to bed, to shut the doors and windows.

"I know where they had their food," she said.

Mouret turned round sharply.

"Yes, I went up again to see if they had all they wanted. As I couldn't hear a sound, I didn't like to knock; I looked in through the keyhole."

"But that's very wrong, very," Marthe interrupted severely.

"You know perfectly well, Rose, I don't like that."

"All right, never mind!" exclaimed Mouret who in different circumstances would have let her have it for prying. "You looked through the keyhole?"

"Yes, monsieur, only for the best."

"Ah, of course. What were they doing?"

"Why, monsieur, they were eating. I saw them eating on the side of the camp bed. The old lady had a napkin spread out. Every time they helped themselves to wine, they corked the bottle and leaned it back on the pillow."

"But what were they eating?"

"I don't really know, monsieur. Looked to me like a bit of ~~pasty~~ in a newspaper. And they had apples too, tiny tiddly ones."

"And they were talking, eh? Did you hear what ~~they were~~ saying?"

Then he rejoined his wife at the bottom of the stairs. Long after she was in bed and asleep he went on listening to the faint sounds coming from the floor above. The priest's room was just over his. He heard him quietly opening the window, and this intrigued him greatly. He lifted his head from the pillow, fighting hard against sleep, wanting to know how long the priest would stay at the window. But sleep won at last; Mouret was snoring hard, long before he could hear the sound of that window catch creaking faintly back.

Up above, standing bare-headed at the window, Abbé Faujas was looking out into the night. Long he stayed there, glad to be alone at last, deep in the thoughts that set so much sternness on his brow. Below him, he was aware of the others sleeping quietly in this house where he had come but a few hours before: the children's pure breath, Marthe's blameless sleep, and Mouret's heavier regular breathing. And there was scorn in the poise of that wrestler's neck as he raised his head to look beyond into the very heart of the little sleeping town. The tall trees in the garden of Government House were a dark mass, and Monsieur Rastoil's pear-trees sprawled with lean twisted limbs; beyond, only a sea of shadow, a void, giving out no sound. The town had the innocence of a baby girl in her cradle.

Abbé Faujas stretched his arms out in an ironical challenge, as though he would take Plassans and crush its breath, straining it against his strong chest. And he muttered:

"Fools, they smiled this evening, when they saw me crossing their streets!"

CHAPTER THREE

NEXT day Mouret spent the morning spying on his new tenant. This prying was going to help in filling the idle hours which he usually spent at home fussing, tidying things away, picking quarrels with his wife and children. From now on he would have something to occupy him, an amusement that would take him out of the daily round. He didn't like padres, as he said, so the first priest that had come into his life interested him to an extraordinary degree. For the man had brought a mysterious flavour into the house, an unknown quantity that was almost disturbing. Though Mouret called himself a free-thinker, a Voltairian, now, at close quarters with this priest, he felt all the surprise of a hum-drum fellow, a queer little thrill, spiced with a lively touch of curiosity.

No sound came from the second floor. Mouret looked down on the stairs, he even ventured up as far as the attic. As he moved along the passage, taking his time, he thought he heard a rustle of slippers inside the door which excited him greatly. But finding nothing very definite, he went down the stairs again and into the garden. There he walked under the arbour at the bottom and looked up, trying to see through the windows what was going on in the rooms. But he didn't see so much as a shadow of the priest. Faujas, who evidently had no curtains, had made his own clothes to cover the windows.

"They went out, monsieur; the mother first, then the priest. I wouldn't have seen them, they move so quietly, if I hadn't noticed their shadows passing by on the tiles in my kitchen when they opened the door, and I looked out into the street to see; but they walked off and smartly too, I can tell you."

"That's very curious. And where was I, then?"

"I think you were down the garden, monsieur, looking at the grapes on the arbour."

This was enough to put Mouret into a vile temper. He stormed against all priests—they were a secretive lot, up to their necks in schemes that would puzzle the devil himself; so ridiculously prudish too that no one had ever seen a priest having a wash. In fact he was sorry that he had ever let to a priest whom he didn't know.

"And it's all your fault!" he said to his wife, as she rose from table. Marthe was about to protest and remind him of their argument of the evening before, but she merely looked at him and said nothing. He, however, couldn't bring himself to the point of going out as usual. To and fro he went, between dining-room and garden, claiming there was a mess everywhere, that the house was going to rack and ruin; then his wrath turned on Serge and Octave who had gone off to school, so he said, half an hour too early.

"Isn't Daddy going out?" whispered Désirée in her mother's ear. "What a nuisance for us if he stays."

Marthe told her to be quiet. At last Mouret said something about a deal that he ought to see through that day. He hadn't a moment to himself, he couldn't even have a day's rest at home when he felt like it. Off he went, annoyed not to be staying there on the look-out.

In the evening, when he returned, he was feverish with curiosity.

"Any news of the priest?" he asked, even before his hat was off.

"The priest?" she repeated, taken aback. "Ah, the priest, yes. I haven't seen him, I think he's installed now. Rose told me some furniture had arrived."

"Just what I was afraid of," cried Mouret. "I should have liked to have been here, for after all the furniture's my guarantee. I guessed you wouldn't budge from your chair. You don't think of things, wife. . . . Rose, Rose!"

And when cook came in:

"Has furniture come for the people upstairs?"

"Yes, monsieur, in a little handcart—Bergasse's handcart; I recognized it, he's the market dealer. Not much of a load either. Madame Faujas was walking behind. As it was coming

up Balande Street, she even gave a hand to the man who was pushing it."

"But the furniture: did you see what it was like? How many pieces? Did you count?"

"Certainly, monsieur; I was at the door. Every piece went past me, which didn't seem to Madame Faujas' liking. Let's see: first they took up an iron bedstead, then a chest of drawers, two tables, four chairs. Faith, that's all. And not new stuff; I wouldn't give thirty crowns for the lot."

"But you ought to have warned the mistress; we can't let rooms like this. I'm going straight off to have it out with Abbé Bourrette."

He was quite angry, and was walking out, when Marthe brought him to a full stop by saying:

"Listen, I was forgetting. They've paid six months' rent in advance."

"Oh, they've paid?" he stammered, almost put out.

"Yes, the old lady came down and handed me this."

She felt in her work-table and gave her husband seventy-five francs in five franc pieces, carefully wrapped in a piece of newspaper. Mouret counted the money, mumbling to himself.

"If they pay, they're quite free. Still, they're a funny sort. Everyone can't be rich, that's true; only that's no reason why you should behave in a suspicious way when you haven't got a sou."

"And there was something else I wanted to tell you," Marthe continued, seeing that he had cooled down. "The old lady asked me if we were prepared to let her have the camp bed. I told her that we didn't use it, that she could keep it as long as she liked."

"You were quite right, we must oblige them. It's as I told you: what annoys me about these devils of priests is that one never knows what they're thinking or what they're up to. Apart from that there are often very honourable men among them."

The money seemed to have consoled him. He cracked jokes, teased Serge about the story of the *Missions to China* which he was reading at the time. And during dinner he pretended to be thinking no more about the people upstairs. But when Octave said that he had seen Abbé Faujas coming out of the bishop's palace, Mouret could no longer hold himself in. At dessert, he launched again into his gossip of the previous evening. Then he felt a little ashamed, for under the dense outer skin of the ~~recluse~~ ~~man~~ man he had a shrewd wit. Above all, he had ~~great good sense~~ a clear judgement of things which usually ~~took him~~ ~~time~~

heart of a matter in the thick of all the usual provincial gossip.

"After all," he said as he went to bed, "it's not right to poke your nose into other people's affairs. The priest can do as he likes. You get tired of talking always about such people. I'm washing my hands of them now."

A week went by. Mouret had resumed his usual occupations; he roamed over the house, argued with his children, went out in the afternoons to make business deals for his pleasure without ever mentioning them, ate and slept like a man for whom life is on the gentle slope, free of jolts and surprises of any kind. The house once again seemed dead. Marthe was at her usual place on the terrace beside the little work-table. Désirée played beside her. The two boys brought their usual liveliness home at the usual hours. And Rose the cook lost her temper and grumbled at everyone, while the garden and dining-room slept on peacefully.

"It's not for the sake of saying so," Mouret kept repeating to his wife, "but you see you were quite wrong in thinking that our life would be disturbed if we let the second floor. We're quieter than before, the house is smaller and happier."

And sometimes he would raise his eyes to the upper windows, which Madame Faujas had furnished on the second day with heavy cotton curtains. Not a fold in these curtains ever stirred. There was a smug look about them, the primness of the sacristy. They were stiff and cold. Behind them silence seemed to thicken in cloistral calm. Only now and then were the windows opened a little, giving a glimpse beyond the curtains' whiteness of the shadows on the high ceilings. But watch as Mouret might, never did he see the hand that opened or closed them; he could not even hear the squeak of the catch. No human sound came down from above.

At the end of the first week, Mouret still had not seen Abbé Faujas again. Having a man living above like this who did not vouchsafe so much as a glimpse of his shadow, began to make Mouret feel nervously uneasy. Try as he would to appear indifferent, his questions began again; he opened an enquiry.

"Don't you see him, then?" he asked his wife.

"I think I saw him yesterday when he came in, but I'm not quite sure. His mother always wears a black dress; it was she perhaps."

And as he was pressing her with his questions, she told him what she knew.

"Rose is sure he goes out each day; in fact he is out for quite

a time. As for his mother, she's as regular as clockwork; she comes down every morning at seven to go and buy the food. She has a large basket, always shut, in which she apparently brings everything; coal, bread, wine, food, for no tradesman is ever seen calling. And they are very polite; Rose says they greet her when they meet. But more often than not, she doesn't even hear them coming downstairs."

"Funny sort of cooking they must do up there," murmured Mouret, who had gathered nothing from this information.

Another evening Octave happened to say that he had seen Abbé Faujas going into St. Saturnin. His father asked him about his appearance, how the passers-by looked at him, what he might be doing at the cathedral.

"You *are* inquisitive!" the young man cried with a laugh. "Well, all I know is, he didn't look too good in the sunlight with that rusty cassock of his. I even noticed that he kept along the houses, in the line of shadow, where the cassock looked darker. Oh there's nothing grand about him; he keeps his head down, moves along fast. There were two girls there who began laughing when he crossed the square. And he raised his head, looked at them in the mildest way, didn't he, Serge?"

Serge in turn told his father that, several times on his way home from school, he had found himself walking behind Abbé Faujas who was returning from St. Saturnin. He crossed the streets without a word to anybody; he didn't appear to know a living soul, and seemed slightly abashed by the undercurrent of amusement that he felt around him.

"Are they talking about him, then, in the town?" asked Mouret, who was as interested as he could be.

"No one's said anything to me about the priest," answered Octave. "But they are talking about him," went on Serge. "Abbé Bourrette's nephew told me that he wasn't very well considered at the church; they don't like priests coming from a distance. Then he looks so wretched. When they've got used to him they'll leave the poor man in peace, but to start with they must find out things."

So then Marthe advised the two lads not to answer if anyone out-of-doors asked them about the priest.

"Oh, they can answer," cried Mouret. "What we have to tell certainly won't compromise him."

After this, with the best will in the world and without thinking any harm, he turned his children into spies to dog the priest.

Octave and Serge had to tell him anything said in town, and also had orders to follow the priest when they came across him. But this source of information quickly dried up. The undercurrent of talk occasioned by the arrival of a curate from outside the diocese had died down. The town seemed to think no more about the "poor man" with his threadbare cassock, gliding along in the shadow of its little streets; people merely looked down on him. Besides, the priest always made the shortest way to the cathedral and returned always by the same streets. Octave laughingly remarked that he was counting the cobble-stones.

At home Mouret wanted to make use of Désirée, who never went out. In the evenings he took her down to the end of the garden, listening to her prattle about what she had seen and done during the day; he was trying to bring her round to the subject of the people on the second floor.

"Listen," he said to her one day, "tomorrow, when the window's opened, throw your ball into the room, and go up and ask for it."

So the next day, she sent her ball up. But she scarcely reached the steps to the terrace when the ball, returned by an invisible hand, came bouncing back. Her father, who had been counting on the girl's friendly ways to renew the contacts broken off after the very first day, gave the game up as lost; clearly he was up against a very firm determination on the priest's part to keep himself barricaded in. This contest only added fuel to his curiosity. He descended to gossiping in corners with the cook, much to the displeasure of Marthe, who reproached him with his lack of dignity. But he answered with temper and lies. As he felt he was in the wrong, he only chatted with Rose about his tenants on the sly.

One morning Rose beckoned him into the kitchen.

"Ah there, monsieur," she said as she closed the door, "for an hour and more I've been watching to see if you were coming down from your room."

"Have you found out something, then?"

"You'll see. Yesterday evening I had a talk with Madame Faujas which lasted more than an hour."

Mouret quivered with joy. He sat down on a kitchen chair with half its rush seat gone, among the dish-cloths and last night's peelings.

"Tell me quickly," he said, lowering his voice.

"Well then," the cook went on, "I was on the front doorstep last night saying goodbye to Monsieur Rastoin's maid, when Madame

that she was listening, that I could go on. And till fall of night we went on talking like that, friendly-like, with our backs against the wall."

Mouret rose to his feet in anger.

"What!" he cried, "that's all! For an hour she kept you gossiping and told you nothing at all!"

"She told me, when it was dark: 'It's turning cooler now'. Then she picked up her bucket and walked upstairs."

"Why, what a ninny you are! That old woman's worth ten of your sort. A nice laugh they must be having now, to know everything about us that they wanted to know. Do you hear, Rose, you're just a ninny."

The old cook was by no means patient; she began stumping about, rattling the saucepans and pans, twisting the clouts and throwing them about.

"Listen here, monsieur," she stammered out, "if it was to be rude to me that you came into my kitchen, you're wasting your time. You can go away. What I did was only to please you. If the mistress came in and found us here together doing what we're doing, she'd scold me, and she would be right, because it's not good. After all, I couldn't pluck the words out of the lady's mouth. I was caught as anyone might be. I chatted, I talked about your affairs. If she didn't tell me about hers, so much the worse for you. Go and ask her yourself, if you feel so set upon it. P'raps you won't be such a ninny as me."

Her voice went higher and higher. Mouret thought it wiser to get away, closing the kitchen door so that his wife shouldn't hear. But Rose had the door open again behind his back, and bawled after him into the hall:

"You mark me, I'll have nothing to do with it. Pass your shabby old errands on to anyone you like."

Mouret was beaten. He smarted at this defeat. Out of spite he allowed himself to say that these people on the second floor were quite third rate people. And gradually he spread this opinion among his acquaintances till it was adopted by the whole town. Abbé Faujas was looked on as a priest without means, without any ambition, quite outside the intrigues in the diocese. He was thought to be ashamed of his poverty, willing to accept the humbler duties at the cathedral, keeping as much as possible in the shadow where he seemed to find his pleasure. One bit of curiosity was left: why he had come from Besançon to Plassans? Awkward tales were

going round. But these theories appeared rather too enterprising, Mouret himself, who had spied on his tenants for pleasure, to pass the time, only as he would have played at cards or bowls, was beginning to forget that he had a priest lodging in his house, when an event occurred which brought something fresh into his life.

One afternoon as he was coming home, he saw the curate Faujas ahead, coming up Balande Street. It was the first time, in the month that the priest had been with him, that he had set eyes on him in broad daylight like this. The curate was still wearing his old cassock; he was walking slowly, with his three-cornered hat in his hand, bareheaded in spite of the wind, which was keen. The street, which climbs very steeply, was deserted, with its tall stark houses and closed shutters. Mouret, who had begun hurrying, presently took to walking on tip-toe, fearing the priest might hear him and make off. But as they both drew near to Monsieur Rastoil's house, a group of people came out of Government Square and entered this house. The curate Faujas had swerved slightly to avoid these gentlemen. He watched the door shut to, then, stopping suddenly, he turned to face his landlord who was coming up with him.

"How glad I am to meet with you like this," he said, with his great politeness, "otherwise I should have taken the liberty of disturbing you this evening. On the day when we last had rain, water leaked through the ceiling in my room which I would like you to see."

Mouret stood there facing him and stammering, saying that he was ready to do so. And as they walked in together, he ended by asking at what time he could come up to see the ceiling.

"Why, at once, please," answered the priest, "unless that is too much trouble."

Mouret went up behind him, stifling with indignation, while Rose watched them going up stair by stair, standing at her kitchen door bewitched with surprise.

CHAPTER FOUR

As he reached the second floor, Mouret felt more excited than a schoolboy about to enter a woman's bedroom for the first time. This unexpected fulfilment of a desire so long restrained, the hope that he might see outlandish things, quite checked his breath. Meanwhile the curate, hiding the key in his large fingers, slipped it into the lock with no sound of a click. As on hinges of velvet, the door swung back. The priest, stepping aside, silently invited Mouret to walk in.

The cotton curtains hanging over the two windows were so thick that they gave the room a chalky pallor, the half light of a walled-in cell. The room was large, high in the ceiling, with a clean but faded wallpaper of a quiet yellow. Mouret ventured in, taking little steps over the tiled floor, which was spotless as a mirror, and it seemed to him that its coldness struck through the soles of his boots. Slyly he turned his eyes, surveyed the iron bedstead; it had no curtains, but the sheets were so smoothly spread that one would have thought a white stone bench had been set in a corner. The chest of drawers, all by itself at the other end of the room, a little table standing in the centre, and two chairs, one by each window—that was all the furniture. Not one sheet of paper on the table, not one object on the chest of drawers, not a coat hanging on the walls; wood, marble, wall—all was bare. Over the chest of drawers, a large Christ in black wood alone cut into the bare grey with its sombre cross.

"Here, monsieur, this way," said the priest; "the stain on the ceiling came in this corner."

But Mouret was in no hurry, he was relishing the scene. Though he did not see the strange things that he had vaguely hoped to see, for him, the freethinker, the room had a peculiar smell. A priest smell, he was thinking; it smelt of one not as other men, who blows out his candle to change a shirt, who leaves nothing about, neither razors nor drawers. What annoyed him was that he could not see

anything left lying on the furniture or in the corners which might give him food for thoughts. The room was like this devil of a fellow—dumb, cold, polite, impenetrable. What surprised him extremely was that he did not find as expected any impression of poverty. On the contrary, the effect made upon him was the same that he had felt one day in the past when he had walked into the sumptuously furnished drawing room of a prefect in Marseilles. The great Christ seemed to fill the whole room with those dark arms.

But he really must bestir himself, move over to the corner where the priest was calling him.

"You see the stain, don't you?" the curate said. "It's not quite so noticeable as yesterday."

Mouret stood up on his toes, blinked his eyes, but could see nothing. So then the priest drew back the curtains, and at last he could see a faint rusty mark.

"It's not very serious," he murmured.

"Oh certainly, but I thought I ought to let you know. The leak must be near the edge of the roof."

"Yes, you're right, near the edge of the roof."

But now Mouret wasn't answering; he was looking at the room as it was now lit by the cruder light of day. It looked less solemn, but it maintained absolute silence. No, there wasn't so much as a grain of dust to speak of the life of the priest.

"Perhaps," the curate continued, "we might see something out of the window. Just a moment."

And he opened the window. But Mouret exclaimed that he wouldn't disturb him further, that it was the merest trifle, that the workmen would easily trace the leak.

"But you're not disturbing me in the least, I assure you," said the priest, insisting in a friendly way. "I know that landlords like to see for themselves. Please do look more closely. The house is yours."

He even smiled as he made this last remark, which was not often his way. Then, when Mouret had leaned out with him over the sill, and both had their eyes up to the gutter, he entered into architectural details, explaining how the leak might have occurred.

"You see, I think there's a slight sag in the tiles, perhaps one is even broken; unless it's that crack which you see there along the cornice, which is continued down the retaining wall."

"Yes, that may well be so," answered Mouret. "I must confess, monsieur, that I'm not an expert. The builder will see."

So then the priest stopped talking repairs. He stayed at the window quietly, looking over the gardens below. Mouret, leaning out beside him, did not like to withdraw, out of politeness. He was quite won over when his tenant, after a silence, spoke to him in his gentle voice:

"You have a pretty garden, monsieur."

"Oh, quite ordinary," he answered. "There used to be one or two handsome trees which I had to have down, because nothing would grow in their shade. One has to think of the useful side, eh? The patch is enough for our needs, we have vegetables right through the season."

The priest expressed surprise and asked for details. The garden was one of those old provincial gardens, with arbours round divided into four regular squares by tall box hedges. In the middle there was a small basin, empty of water. One square only was kept for flowers. In the other three, planted at their corners with fruit trees, grew splendid cabbages, superb salads. The walks between strewn with yellow sand, were kept very tidy.

"It's a little paradise," the curate kept saying.

"Oh, but there are many disadvantages," said Mouret, pleading against the lively satisfaction that he felt to hear such praise for his property. "For instance, you must have noticed that we're on a slope here. The gardens are terraced. So Monsieur Rastoil's lower than mine, and mine in turn is lower than the Government House garden. Rain water often does damage. Then, what's worse the Government House people overlook me, all the more because they've constructed that terrace overhanging my wall. It's true that I overlook Monsieur Rastoil, no great compensation I assure you because I never bother myself with other people's affairs."

The priest seemed to be listening obligingly, nodding his head without asking any question. His eyes were following the indication that his landlord was giving with waves of his hand.

"Look, there's another nuisance," Mouret went on, pointing a lane running along the end of the garden. "You see that narrow track between two walls? That's the Chevillottes cul-de-sac which ends at a carriage gate opening into the Government grounds. As the neighbouring houses have little doors into that lane, and there are mysterious comings and goings all the time. As I have children I had my door fastened up with two stout nails."

He looked at the priest and gave a wink, hoping perhaps for a question about these mysterious comings and goings. But the pri

didn't budge. He looked at the lane and without further curiosity quietly brought his eyes back to the Mourets' garden. Down below on the edge of the terrace, in her accustomed place, Marthe was mending serviettes. She had looked up quickly on first hearing voices above; then, amazed to see her husband beside the priest at a window on the second floor, she had gone on with her work. She seemed no longer aware that they were there. Mouret however had raised his voice, unconsciously boasting as it were, glad to show that he had at last got into this apartment kept so obstinately closed. And the priest at moments let his quiet eyes rest on her, on this woman of whom all he could see was the bowed neck, the full dark coil of her hair.

There was a pause. Faujas still didn't seem inclined to leave the window. He appeared now to be studying their neighbours' borders. Monsieur Rastoi's garden was laid out in English fashion, with little walks, little bits of lawn, dotted with little round beds. At the far end there was a circle of trees with a table and rustic chairs under them.

"Monsieur Rastoi's very rich," said Mouret, following the line of the priest's gaze. "His garden costs him plenty. The cascade—you can't see it—over there, behind the trees, came out at over three hundred francs. And not one vegetable, nothing but flowers. At one time the ladies were even talking of having the fruit trees down. It really would have been murder, because the pear-trees are splendid. Yes, why shouldn't he have his garden the way he likes? When you've got the money!"

And as the priest still had nothing to say:

"You know Monsieur Rastoi, don't you?" he continued, turning towards him. "Every morning, from eight to nine, he walks about under his trees. A fat man, rather short, bald, no beard, head as round as a ball. He turned sixty in the first days of August, I believe. For close on twenty years he's been the presiding judge of our civil court. They say he's a good sort. I don't have anything to do with him. Good morning, good evening, that's all."

He paused as he saw several people coming down the terrace steps of the next house, and walking towards the circle of trees.

"Ah!" he said, lowering his voice. "Why, it's Tuesday today. There's company to dinner."

The priest had made a slight involuntary movement. He was leaning forward to get a better view. Two priests, walking beside two tall girls, seemed to interest him particularly.

"Do you know who those gentlemen are?" Mouret asked.

Faujas' gesture in answer was vague.

"They were walking across Balande Street just when we met. That tall young one, between the two Rastoil young ladies, is Abbé Surin, our bishop's secretary. Very pleasant fellow, they say. In summer I see him playing shuttlecock with the young ladies. The old one, whom you see further back, is one of our vicars-general, Abbé Fenil. He runs the seminary. A terrible man, flat and pointed like a sword. I'm sorry he's not turning round; you'd see his eyes. Surprising you don't know these gentlemen."

"I go out little," Faujas answered; "I visit no one in the town."

"Well, you're wrong there. You must often get bored. Ah! there's one thing to be said for you, monsieur l'abbé, you're not inquisitive. Why, you've been here a whole month, and you don't even know that Monsieur Rastoil has company to dinner every Tuesday! But it stares at you from this window!"

Mouret laughed lightly. He was twitting the priest. His voice then took on a confidential tone:

"You see that tall old man walking with Madame Rastoil: yes, the lean one, the man with a wide-brimmed hat. Well, that's Monsieur de Bourdeu, formerly prefect of the Drôme Department; he was put down by the eighteen forty-eight revolution. Another one you didn't know, I'll bet? And Monsieur Maffre, justice of the peace? That white-haired gentleman, with the big bulging eyes, coming along behind with Monsieur Rastoil? Now really! this time you've no excuse. He's canon honorary of St. Saturnin. Between ourselves, they say he caused the death of his wife by his cruelty and avarice."

He stopped, looked the priest in the face and said bluntly in a bantering way:

"I'm sorry, but I'm not religious-minded, monsieur l'abbé."

Again the priest made that vague gesture with his hand which seemed his only answer and dispensed with clearer explanations.

"No, I'm not religious," Mouret mockingly repeated. "Everyone must be free to choose, eh? Now the Rastoils are church-goers. You must have seen the mother and daughters at St. Saturnin. They're parishioners of yours. Poor girls! Angéline, the elder, is at least twenty-six, and the other one, Aurélie, will soon be twenty-four. And not beauties either; sallow and peevish-looking. The trouble is they must marry off the elder girl first. Oh, they'll find someone eventually, because of the dowries. As for the mother,

that plump little woman walking along meek as a sheep, she's given poor old Rastoil a rough time of it."

He winked his left eye, a trick that was usual with him when he cracked a rather risky joke. The priest had lowered his eyelids, waiting for what would come; then, as his companion said nothing, he lifted them again and watched the company next door settling down under the trees round the table.

Mouret went on with his explanations:

"They'll be there till dinner-time, enjoying the cool air. Every Tuesday it's the same. Abbé Surin has a grand time. There he is laughing away with Miss Aurélie——. Ah, the vicar-general has spotted us. What eyes, eh? He's none too fond of me, because I had a difference with a relation of his. But where's Bourrette the rector? We haven't seen him, have we? That's very surprising. He never misses a Tuesday with Monsieur Rastoil. He must be unwell. Him you know of course. And what a worthy man! God's lamb."

But Abbé Faujas wasn't listening. Across the gardens, his eye kept meeting Abbé Fenil's. He did not look away; he was perfectly cool under the vicar-general's scrutiny. His elbows had settled more firmly on the window-rail and his eyes seemed to have grown larger.

"Here are the young folks," continued Mouret, as he saw three young fellows coming in. "The oldest is Rastoil's son; he's just been called to the Bar. The two others are the sons of the police magistrate; they're still at school. Hallo, why haven't my two rascals got home?" But just at this moment, Octave and Serge appeared on the terrace, below. They leaned against the rail, chaffing Désirée, who had just sat down by her mother. The boys, who had spotted their father up on the second floor, lowered their voices, and were laughing more quietly.

"All my little family," Mouret murmured complacently. "We just keep to ourselves; we entertain no one. Our garden's a walled paradise and defies the Devil to come in and tempt us."

He laughed as he said this, because privately he was still enjoying himself at the priest's expense. Faujas had slowly turned his gaze back to the group directly beneath the window, consisting of his landlord's family. He dwelt on it a moment, looking at the old garden with its square vegetable plots hedged with box. Then he took another look at Monsieur Rastoil's showy garden walks, and just as if he wanted to work out a plan of the general scene, he passed on to the garden of Government House. There, there was one

wide central lawn, a carpet of gently undulating green; there were clumps of evergreen shrubs; tall thickly-leaved chestnut trees gave a park-like effect to this stretch of ground caught between the neighbouring houses.

And now Faujas was apparently interested in the scene under the chestnut trees. He even murmured:

"They're very bright, these gardens. There are some people in the left-hand one too."

Mouret looked towards them.

"Every afternoon it's the same," he said calmly. "Those are the intimate friends of Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, our sub-prefect. In summer-time they also gather in the evenings, round the water-basin out of sight, over to the left. Ah, Monsieur de Condamin is back: that handsome old man, well preserved, with high colour. He's our Keeper of Woods and Waters; quite a figure, always to be seen on horse-back, gloved, with tight riding-breeches. And a liar too. He's not from these parts; he married a rather young wife recently. However, that's no business of mine, fortunately."

He again looked down, hearing Désirée laughing her babyish laugh as she played with Serge. But the priest, whose face was colouring slightly, attracted his attention with a remark.

"Is that the sub-prefect," he asked, "the stout gentleman in the white tie?"

This question amused Mouret vastly.

"No, no," he answered with a laugh. "Anyone could see that you don't know Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies. He's not forty. He's a tall handsome bachelor, very much the fine gentleman. The fat person is Dr. Porquier, who attends the best people in Plassans. A fortunate man, I can tell you. He has only one sorrow: his son Guillaume. Now you see those two people sitting on the bench with their backs to us? They are Monsieur Paloque the judge and his wife. The ugliest couple hereabouts. It's hard to say which is the more hideous, the husband or the wife. Lucky they have no children."

Then Mouret began laughing louder. He worked himself up, logged about, banged his hand on the window rail.

"Now," he cried giving a double nod, half intended for the Rastoin's garden, half for Government House, "I can't set eyes on these two different groups without enjoying myself. You don't bother yourself with politics, monsieur l'abbé, otherwise I would give you a good laugh. Just suppose now that rightly or wrongly I

pass for a Republican. I cover a good deal of the country because of my business. I am the peasants' friend; they've even talked of me for a seat on the General Council; in a word, my name is known. Very well! there, on my right, I have the cream of the Royalist set, and there, on the left, with the sub-prefect, the big-wigs of the Empire. Isn't that funny, eh? Here's this poor dear quiet little garden of mine, my little corner of bliss, tucked in between these two enemy camps. I'm always afraid they'll start throwing stones over my walls. You see, their stones might fall in my garden."

This joke brought Mouret to the very pitch of delight. He drew nearer the priest, like a gossip whose tale will be long.

"Plassans is a very interesting place from the political point of view. The *coup d'état* succeeded here because the town is conservative. But above all, it is Legitimist and Orleanist, so much so that immediately after the Empire, it wanted to dictate terms. As a deaf ear was turned, the town got angry and went over to the Opposition. Yes, monsieur, to the Opposition. Last year we returned as deputy the Marquis of Lagrifoul, an old aristocrat of moderate brains, but his election was a nice nuisance for Government House. And look, there he is, the sub-prefect, Péqueur de Saulaies; he's with the mayor, Monsieur Delangré."

The priest looked across eagerly. The sub-prefect, very dark, wore a smile under his waxed moustache. He was immaculately dressed and had the bearing of the fine officer, the agreeable diplomat. Beside him was the mayor, having it out in a fever of gestures and words. He looked short, square in the shoulder, and his features, sharply defined, were rather Punch-like. It looked as though he was talking too much.

chance. They don't know the place and they haven't got the backing. I was confidently told that Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies was to get a prefect's post if the election had gone well. Sister Anne, do you see them coming? He'll be sub-Prefect a long day yet. So now, what will they think up to bring the Marquis down? For think up something they will. Somehow or other they'll try to conquer Plassans."

For a moment or so he had not been looking at the priest, and now he raised his eyes. The sight of that listening face, ears somehow wider, eyes aglow, stopped him dead. All the prudence of the sober citizen in him reawoke; he felt that he had been saying far too much. And so in a rather vexed tone he mumbled:

"After all, I don't know. You hear so many crazy things. All I ask is a peaceful life in my own home."

He wanted to leave the window, but he didn't like to break it off and go abruptly, after chatting intimately like this. He began to suspect that, if one of the two had been laughing at the other, he certainly had not been playing the leading rôle. The priest, completely calm, went on looking right and left, down into the two gardens. He didn't make the slightest attempt to encourage Mouret to continue. So Mouret, who had been hoping impatiently that his wife or one of the children would have the sense to call, was quite relieved when he saw Rose appear on the grass.

"Well now, monsieur!" she called up. "Nothing doing today? The soup's been on the table this quarter of an hour!"

"All right, Rose, I'm coming down," he answered.

He left the window with a word of excuse. The coldness of the room, which he had forgotten behind him, unsettled him completely. It seemed to him like a wide confessional, with its terrible black Christ that must have heard every word. As Faujas was taking leave of him with a brief silent bow, he could not bear this sudden drop in the conversation. He turned back and looked up at the ceiling.

"So," he said, "it's in that corner, is it?"

"What?" asked the priest in great surprise.

"The stain you mentioned to me."

The priest could not forbear a smile. Once again he tried to show Mouret the leak.

"Oh yes, I see it quite plainly now. Very well; I'll have the workmen in tomorrow."

At last he was out. He was still on the landing when

CHAPTER FIVE

NEXT day old Madame Rougon, Marthe's mother, came to pay the Mourets a call. This was quite an event in the family, because there had been a tiff between the son-in-law and his wife's parents, especially since the election of the Marquis of Lagrifoul: the Rougons alleged that Mouret's influence in the countryside had helped to get him elected. So Marthe used to visit her parents by herself. Her mother—Darky Félicité they called her—was still, at sixty-six, as lean and lively as a girl. She dressed only in silk now, heavily flounced, and had a particular affection for yellow and brown.

That day, when she arrived at the door, Marthe and Mouret were alone in the dining-room.

"Hallo!" said he, very surprised, "it's your mother. What can she want with us? It's hardly a month since she called. More wire-pulling, that's certain."

In the days before his marriage, Mouret had been assistant to the Rougons in the old town, in a little shop which was tottering financially, and ever since he had viewed them with mistrust. The grudge they bore him in return was solid and deep; what they couldn't forgive in him was the tradesman who had so promptly succeeded in business. When their son-in-law said: "My fortune's only due to my work," they pursed their lips, understanding perfectly well that he accused them of making theirs in unmentionable dealings. Félicité, in spite of her mansion in Government Square, secretly envied the Mourets' quiet little house, with the fierce jealousy of the retired merchant's wife who does not owe her comfort to savings across the counter.

Félicité kissed her daughter on the forehead, as if Marthe was still sixteen. Next she tendered her hand to Mouret. Both of them used a sub-acid mocking tone when talking together.

"Well," she asked with a smile, "so the police haven't come to fetch you out yet, you old rebel?"

"Not yet," he replied, also laughing. "They're waiting till your husband gives them orders."

"Ah, how nice of you to say that!" answered Félicité, eyes flaming.

Marthe gave Mouret an imploring look; indeed he was going too far. But he was launched now. He went on:

"Really, we are thoughtless: here we are, receiving you in the dining-room. Please let us go to the drawing-room."

This was one of his stock jokes. When he welcomed Félicité to the house, he imitated her grand manner. Marthe protested that they were quite comfortable where they were, but it was no use: both of them had to follow her husband into the drawing-room. And he went to much trouble too: he opened the shutters, pushed arm-chairs forward. They never used this drawing-room; the windows were mostly left shut. It was a barn of a room, with one large piece of furniture kept under sheeting, yellowed by the garden damp.

"This is too bad," murmured Mouret, wiping the dust off a little *picr-table*, "Rose does neglect everything."

Then turning to his mother-in-law and speaking in a sufficiently sarcastic tone, he said:

"Forgive us for welcoming you in this way to our poor dwelling. Everyone can't be rich."

Félicité was furious. She stared at Mouret for a moment, and nearly burst out; then, controlling herself with an effort, she slowly dropped her eyelids. When she raised them again, she said in a amiable voice:

"I've just been calling on Madame de Condamin, and I came in to see how the nice family is. The children are well, I hope, and you too, my dear Mouret?"

"Yes, we're all wonderfully well," he answered, ~~surprised by so~~ much amiability.

"You can say what you like," said Mouret, chewing his words in a mumble, "your Maffre is a churchman, your Bourdeu a fool, and the rest of them are mostly scoundrels. That's my opinion. I thank you for your invitation but it would be too much trouble. I go early to bed. I shall stay at home."

Félicité rose, turned her back on Mouret, saying to her daughter: "I can still count on you, can't I, dearest?"

"Certainly," answered Marthe, who wanted to soften Mouret's outrageous refusal.

The old lady was about to go, when she seemed to change her mind. She asked to kiss Désirée, whom she had seen in the garden. She didn't even want the child to be called; she stepped down on to the terrace, still wet after a shower that morning. She fondly caressed her grand-daughter, who however remained somewhat scared by her. Then, looking up as if by chance, and seeing the curtains on the second floor, she exclaimed:

"Ah, so you've let? Ah yes, I remember, to a priest, I think I heard it mentioned. What sort of a man is he, this priest?"

Mouret stared at her. A suspicion flashed across his mind. Her sole reason for calling, he suspected, was the priest.

"Upon my word," he said, still looking at her, "I don't know. But perhaps *you* can give me some information?"

"I?" she exclaimed with a great air of surprise. "Why, I've never seen him. Wait a moment, I know that he's a curate at St. Saturnin; Abbé Bourrette told me so. And now that reminds me: I ought to invite him to my Thursdays. The Director of the High Seminary and his lordship's secretary are already coming."

Then, turning to Marthe she said:

"I'll tell you what, when you see your tenant, you might sound him, so as to let me know whether an invitation would be agreeable to him."

"We hardly see him at all," Mouret hastened to reply. "He comes in and goes out without saying a word. Besides, it's none of my business."

And still he watched her suspiciously. Certainly she knew more about the priest than she was prepared to say. And further, she wasn't flinching under her son-in-law's watchful eye.

"After all, it's all the same to me," she went on, quite easily. "If he's presentable, I shall find a way to invite him an
Goodbye, children."

She was going up the terrace steps when a tall old man ap-

the door into the hall. He wore an overcoat and trousers of blue cloth that were very clean, and had a fur cap pulled down over his eyes. He was holding a whip in his hand.

"Why, it's uncle Macquart!" cried Mouret, glancing curiously at his mother-in-law.

Félicité's gesture had shown keen annoyance. Macquart was an illegitimate brother of Rougon and, thanks to the latter, had returned to France after being exiled for his part in the country rising in 1851.

Since his return to Piedmont, he had been living the well-padded existence of a man with some little means. He had bought—where the money came from goodness knows—a cottage at Les Tuilettes, nine miles out from Plassans. Gradually he had rigged himself out; he had even managed recently to buy a trap and horse, since when he had been much in evidence on the roads, smoking his pipe, basking in the sun, and laughing the laugh of a hunter home from the kill. Rougon's enemies whispered that the two brothers had done some dirty trick together, and that Pierre Rougon was supporting Antoine Macquart.

"Good day, uncle," said Mouret with a special air, and more than once. "So you've come to pay us a little visit?"

"Yes, yes," Macquart answered good-naturedly. "Always when I come in to Plassans, you know. Why, Félicité, well I never! Fancy meeting you here! I came in to see Rougon, I wanted a word with him."

"He was at home, wasn't he?" slipped in Félicité, anxiously. "That's all right, Macquart, all right."

"Yes, he was there," said Macquart calmly. "I saw him and we had a talk. He's a good chap, is Rougon."

He laughed lightly. And while Félicité danced with anxiety, he went on in his drawling voice, so curiously broken that he always seemed to be taking a rise out of people:

"Mouret, m'lad, I've brought you two rabbits; they're in a basket over there. I gave them to Rose. I had two for Rougon as well. You'll find them at home, Félicité, and you won't be sorry either. The fattest old rascals! I fattened them up for you. You see, children, I like to give presents."

Félicité was quite pale. Her lips were tightly set and Mouret was still watching her with his tongue in his cheek. She would have very much liked to get away, but she was afraid of the gossip, if she left Macquart behind with them.

"Thank you, uncle," said Mouret. "Those plums you brought last time were rattling good. You'll have a drink?"

"I won't say no."

And after Rose had brought him a glass of wine, he sat down on the terrace railing. He drank the glassful slowly, clacking his tongue and holding the wine up to the light.

"Comes from St. Eutrope way, that wine. They wouldn't catch me out. I know the country round here all right."

He nodded his head and chuckled.

Then suddenly Mouret asked him, with special meaning in his voice:

"And how's things at Les Tulettes?"

Macquart raised his eyes, looked at them all; then with one last clack of his tongue he put his glass down beside him on the stone.

"Not too bad," he answered casually. "I had news of her the day before yesterday. She's still just the same."

Félicité had turned away. There was a silence. Mouret had just laid a finger on a sore spot in family affairs, when he alluded to the mother of Rougon and Macquart. She had been shut up as a lunatic for several years in the asylum at Les Tulettes. Macquart's little place was close by, and it looked as though Rougon had posted the old rascal there to keep an eye on the grandmother.

"It's getting late," Macquart said at last. "I must get back before dark. And I say, Mouret, m'lad, I'm expecting you one of these days. You did promise to come."

"I'll come, uncle, I'll come."

"No, I mean the whole family. I want you all to come, do you hear, all of you. I get bored by myself. I'll do the cooking for you."

Then turning to Félicité he said:

"Tell Rougon that I'm counting also on him and you. Even if his old mother is there, just over the way, that shouldn't stop you coming. Life's too boring, otherwise. I tell you she's all right, she's well cared for. You can trust me. And you'll taste a little wine I've found on the slopes of the Seille; a little wine that goes to the head, I promise you."

As he talked, he was moving towards the door. Félicité followed so hard on his heels that she seemed to be pushing him out. Everybody went with him to the street. He was unhitching the reins, which he had fastened to a shutter, when Abbé Faujas, who was coming in, passed through the group with a slight bow. He was like a dark shadow gliding silently by. Félicité turned round quickly;

Her eyes followed him even on to the stairs, as she had not had time to look at his face. Macquart, dumbfounded, was shaking his head, and muttered:

"What, lad, are you taking in priests now? A queer eye, that man's got. You look out; cassocks are unlucky."

He got up into his trap, whistling softly, and started off down Balande Street with his horse trotting easily. His rounded back and fur cap disappeared at the bend into Taravelle Street.

When Mourët turned round again he heard his mother-in-law saying to Marthe: "I'd rather it was you, so that the invitation seemed less formal. If you could manage a word with him, I'd be glad."

She stopped, realizing that she was overheard. Then she gave Désirée a fond parting hug, and left at last, with one more look to make sure that Macquart was not coming back to chat behind her back about herself.

"Now you know I absolutely forbid you to get mixed up in your mother's doings," said Mourët as they went in. "She's always up to her neck in things and nobody knows what it's all about. What the deuce does she want with the priest? She wouldn't invite him for his handsome face, if she hadn't got some secret reason. That curate hasn't come to Plassans for nothing. There's something going on below the surface."

Marthe had gone back to her eternal mending which took her days and days. He prowled round her a little longer, muttering:

"They do amuse me, old Macquart and your mother. And don't they hate each other! You saw how furious she was to find him here. You'd think she was always afraid of hearing him say things people shouldn't know. It's not just embarrassment; he was saying queer things. But you won't see me at his place. I swore I wouldn't poke into that mess. Mark me, my father was right when he said this Rougon-Macquart lot weren't worth the rope to hang them with. I'm of their blood like you, so you needn't be offended at what I'm saying. I say it because it's true. They've made their pile now, but that hasn't cleaned off the mud, far from it."

And after that he went off to Sauvaire Place, where he met his friends and chatted about the weather and the crops and the events of the preceding day. A large deal in almonds, which he took in hand the next day, kept him busy for a week with continual comings and goings that almost put Abbé Faujas out of his head. Besides, the priest was beginning to annoy him; he didn't talk enough, he

was secretive. He avoided him twice, guessing that the priest was only looking for him to hear the rest about the Government gang and the Rastoil gang. And as Rose had told him that Madame Faujas had tried to make her talk, he vowed to keep his mouth shut now. He had another amusement to while away his empty hours. So now, when he saw those well-closed curtains up above, he grumbled:

"You hide yourself, old boy. I know you've got your eyes on me behind your curtains; it's not going to help you much. If you think I'm your man for knowing the neighbours, you're wrong!"

The idea that Abbé Faujas was on the watch pleased him extremely. He took great care not to fall into any trap. But one evening as he was coming home, fifty paces ahead of him he saw Bourrette the rector and Faujas the curate standing at Monsieur Rastoil's door. He hid at a house corner. The two priests stood there a full quarter of an hour. They talked busily together, separated, then came together again. Mouret's guess was that Abbé Bourrette was begging Abbé Faujas to go in and see the presiding judge with him. But Faujas was trying to get out of it and finally refused with some impatience. It was a Tuesday, company day for dinner. At last Bourrette went in to Monsieur Rastoil's house, and Faujas, looking meek as usual, glided off to his own. This gave Mouret food for thought. After all, why shouldn't the priest visit Monsieur Rastoil? All the St. Saturnin lot did, Abbé Fenil, Abbé Surin and the others. There wasn't one cassock in Plassans that hadn't enjoyed the cool of evening in the garden, by the cascade. That the new curate should refuse was quite extraordinary.

When Mouret got in, he quickly went to the end of his garden to have a good look at the windows on the second floor. After a moment, he saw a movement in the curtain covering the second window to the right. Faujas was there for certain, spying on what was happening in Rastoil's garden. And from certain further movements of the curtain, Mouret guessed that he was also looking towards Government House.

Next day, a Wednesday, as he was going out, he was told by Rose that Abbé Bourrette had been with the folks upstairs for an hour at least. So then he went in again and began ferreting in the dining-room. And as Marthe asked him what he was looking for, he flew into a temper, and talked about some document that he must have to take with him. He went up to the first floor to see if he hadn't left it up there. Then, after lurking quite a time behind

bedroom door, he thought he heard chairs moving overhead, so he came downstairs slowly, waited a moment in the hall, to give the rector time to catch up with him.

"Hallo! Is that you, rector? How nice to see you! Are you going back to St. Saturnin? What a lucky chance; I'm going that way myself. I'll walk with you, if you don't mind."

The rector replied that he would be delighted. The two of them walked slowly up Balande Street, making for Government Square. The rector was a stout man, with a good simple face, and large childish blue eyes. His broad silk sash, tightly drawn in, curved simply round a soft and shining middle, and he walked with head held back rather; his arms were too short and his legs already heavy.

"Well," said Mouret, going straight to it, "you've just been seeing the excellent Monsieur Faujas. I owe you thanks; you brought me a tenant there not often found."

"Yes, yes," the rector murmured, "he's a worthy man."

"And hardly a sound! We don't know there's a newcomer in the house. And very polite, very well-mannered too. And do you know what? I was told that he was a superior mind, a present that they wanted to give the diocese here."

And as they had now reached the middle of Government Square, Mouret stopped short and looked straight at the rector.

"Oh, indeed!" was all the rector would say, and he looked surprised.

"I was assured it was so. Our bishop was said to have plans for his future. Meanwhile, the new curate was to walk in the shade, to avoid arousing jealousy."

The rector had started walking again, and was turning the corner into La Banne Street. He said quietly:

"You surprise me very much. Faujas is a simple man, in fact he has even too much humility. At the church, for instance, he undertakes little tasks that we usually leave to priests accustomed to such duties. He's a saint, but not a clever fellow. I have hardly seen him at the bishop's palace. From the first day, he was on cold terms with Abbé Fenil. Yet I did explain to him that he must be friends with the vicar-general if he wanted to be well received at the palace. He didn't understand; rather a narrow judgement, I fear. Yes, it's like his continual visits to Abbé Compan, our poor rector, who took to his bed a fortnight ago, and I fear we are certainly going to lose him. Well, Faujas' visits are out of place, they will do him immense harm. Compan never could get on with Fenil. Really, one must be very

fresh from Besançon not to know a thing well understood in the whole diocese!"

He was working himself up. In his turn he stopped at the entry to Cluckett Street, and stood in front of Mouret.

"No, my dear sir, you have been misled: Faujas is as innocent as a new-born child. I've no ambition, you know. And Heaven knows I am fond of Compan, a heart of gold! None the less, I only go and hold his hand in secret. He himself said to me: 'Bourrette, old friend, I'm not long for this world. If you want to be rector after me, try not to be seen too often ringing at my door. Come in the dark and knock three times and my sister will open the door to you.' So now, you understand, I wait till it's dark. It's no use upsetting one's life. One has troubles enough already."

His voice had softened. He clasped his hands over his stomach, and began walking on again, moved by a simple self-pity that made him bewail himself, as he murmured:

"Poor Compan, poor Compan!"

Mouret was left perplexed. Abbé Faujas was more of a puzzle than ever.

"Even so, I was given quite definite information. In fact there was question of finding an important post for him."

"No, no, I assure you that it is not so," exclaimed the priest. "There's no future for Faujas. Here's another fact. You know that I dine every Tuesday with the presiding judge. Last week, he earnestly begged me to bring Faujas to him. He wanted to get to know him, size him up, no doubt. Well, you'd never guess what Faujas did. He refused the invitation, my dear monsieur, flatly refused. It was no use my telling him that he was going to make life impossible for himself at Plassans, that he would fall out completely with Fenil, if he was going to be so impolite to Monsieur Rastoil. He grew obstinate; he wouldn't hear a word. I even believe, God forgive me! that he told me in an angry moment that he had no need to commit himself by accepting a dinner in that way."

Father Bourrette began to laugh. He was outside St. Saturnin now; he kept Mouret standing for a moment at the side door to the cathedral.

"He's a child, a big child," he continued; "as if dining with Monsieur Rastoil could compromise him! So when your mother-in-law, good Madame Rougon, asked me yesterday to pass on an invitation for Faujas, I did not conceal from her that I was afraid I would have a very poor reception."

to the house dancing attendance for scores of trifles, and grumbled if she was away for one hour.

"I'll go, if you wish," she said.

He blew the candle out, put his head on the pillow, murmuring:

"That's right, and you can tell us about your evening. It'll amuse the children."

CHAPTER SIX

NEXT evening about nine Abbé Bourrette came to fetch Abbé Faujas. He had promised to sponsor him and introduce him in the Rougons' *salon*. He looked at him standing ready in the middle of his great bare room, putting on black gloves fading to white at every finger-tip, and could hardly refrain from a slight grimace.

"Haven't you another cassock?" he asked.

"No," Abbé Faujas calmly answered, "this is still respectable, I think."

"Oh, of course, of course," stammered the old priest. "The cold's quite sharp——. Aren't you putting anything on your back? Very well, let's start."

The first frosts had come. Abbé Bourrette, warmly cloaked in a quilted wrap of silk, puffed along after Abbé Faujas; who had nothing to cover his shoulders but his thin worn cassock. They stopped at the corner of Government Square and Banne Street, at a house built entirely of white stone, one of the handsomer buildings in the new town, with rosettes carved along each story. A servant in blue livery received them in the hall. He smiled at Abbé Bourrette as he took his cloak, and seemed very surprised at the sight of the other priest, this great fellow, axe-hewn as it were, who had come through such cold without any cloak. The *salon* was on the first floor.

Abbé Faujas walked in, head erect, with grave composure; while Abbé Bourrette, always in a state when he came to the Rougons' house, though he never missed one of their evenings, shirked matters by escaping into an adjoining room. Faujas slowly walked right across the main room to pay his respects to the mistress of the house, whom he had detected in the middle of a group of five or six ladies. He had to introduce himself, and did so in three words. Félicité rose quickly to her feet. She looked him up and down, swiftly, then came

back to the face, probed his eyes with her ferret-like glance, as she murmured with a smile:

"I am delighted, monsieur l'abbé, really delighted."

Meanwhile the priest's progress across the centre of the room had aroused astonishment. One young woman, who had suddenly looked up, had even half started in alarm, when she saw this towering dark form pass before her. The general impression was unfavourable: he was too tall, too square in the shoulders; his face was too stern; his hands too large. Under the crude light from the chandelier, his cassock looked so deplorable that the ladies felt quite abashed to see a priest so poorly dressed. They brought their fans closer and went on with their whispering, pretending to turn their backs. The men had exchanged glances, pouting significantly.

Félicité sensed the unkindliness of this reception. She seemed vexed. She remained standing in the centre of the room and raised her voice, compelling her guests to hear the compliments that she was paying Abbé Faujas.

"Our dear friend Abbé Bourrette," she was saying with a caressing note in her voice, "told me how difficult he found it to persuade you to come. I can't forgive you, monsieur. You haven't the right to deprive us of your company."

The priest bowed without saying a word in answer. The old lady went on laughingly, giving special effect to some of her words:

"I know more about you than you think, in spite of the care you take to conceal your virtues. Friends have talked to me about you; you are a saint, and I want to be your friend. We'll talk about all this, won't we? For now you are one of our guests."

Abbé Faujas looked at her with a steady gaze, as if he had recognized some masonic sign in her way of moving her fan. He answered her in a low voice:

"Madame, I am entirely at your service."

"And that is just how I would have it," she went on, laughing yet louder. "You will find that here we wish everybody well. But come, I will introduce you to Monsieur Rougon."

She crossed the drawing-room, disturbing several guests to make way for Abbé Faujas, and gave him an importance that finally turned all present against him. In the next room the whist tables were set up; she went straight to her husband who was playing a hand with the solemn look of a diplomat. He moved impatiently when she bent down to his ear; but as soon as he heard her say a

words, he rose quickly from his chair, murmuring: "Good, good." And, apologizing to his partners, he came forward to shake hands with Abbé Faujas. Rougon was then a stoutish pale-faced man, seventy years of age. It was generally agreed at Plassans that he had a handsome face, the white reserved face of a somebody in politics. After a few polite exchanges with the priest, he went back to his seat. Félicité, still smiling, had just returned to her drawing-room.

When the curate found himself alone, he did not look awkward in the least. He remained standing a moment, watching the whist players, but in fact he was looking at the hangings, the carpet, the furniture. It was a small drawing-room in wood colour, with three book-cases of dark pear-wood picked out with brass rods, standing against the three panels of the room. It looked like a magistrate's study. The priest, wishing no doubt to complete his survey, again walked through the large drawing-room. It was in green and also looked formal, but there was more gilt work about, suggesting both the official solemnity of a ministerial room and the showy luxury of a large restaurant. Opposite there was another room, a sort of boudoir, where Félicité saw people in the daytime; a boudoir in beige with a suite embroidered in a purple floral pattern, and so cluttered up with armchairs and poufs and settees that it was difficult to move about.

The curate sat down by the fire, as though to warm his feet. His position gave him a view through a wide-open door of quite half the green drawing-room. He was thinking over Madame Rougon's very gracious reception, working out some problem that called for solution. After pondering like this for a moment, he heard the sound of voices behind him. The high back of his armchair hid him completely, and he closed his eyes a little more. He listened, as though the great heat of the fire had made him doze.

"I only went once to their house in those days," an oily voice was saying. "They were living opposite then, on the other side of Banne Street. You must have been in Paris at the time because everyone in Plassans knew the Rougons' yellow drawing-room. A dreadful drawing-room with lemon wallpaper at sevenpence halfpenny the roll, and a suite done in Utrecht velvet, with wobbly armchairs. And just look at Blacky now, over there, in brown satin, on that pouf. Look at her holding her hand out to little Delangre. 'Pon my word, she's going to give it him to kiss.'"

A younger voice was heard sniggering, and then murmuring:

"They must have robbed pretty hard to get such a grand green drawing-room because, you know, it's the best in the town."

"The lady has always adored playing hostess," the other speaker replied. "When she hadn't a sou she used to drink water, so that she could hand around glasses of lemonade to her guests in the evening. Oh, I know the Rougons as well as the palm of my hand. They're people to reckon with. They had that furious sort of greed that leads to knife-thrusts in the dark. The *coup d'état* came and helped them to realize this dream of good things which had been tormenting them for forty years. And what guzzling, what hiccups over it all when the good things came! Yes, you know, the house they now have belonged then to a Monsieur Peirotte, an individual tax-collector, who was killed in the scrap at St. Roure, in the '51 rising. Yes, my word, they had luck all the way. A stray bullet rid them of this troublesome man, and they were his heirs. Well, as between the house and the tax-collector's office, Félicité would certainly have chosen the house. Her eyes had been dotting on it for more than ten years; she had all the cravings of the pregnant woman; it made her ill to look at the opulent curtains hanging in the windows. The house was her Tuileries, as the saying went in Paris after the 2nd of December."

Abbé Faujas had quietly turned his head, so as to see what was going on in the great drawing-room. He saw Madame Rougon in all her pride in the middle of the circle about her. She seemed to grow taller on her dwarf-like feet, and make every back bend low before her gaze like a victorious queen. Sometimes a dream-like moment would make her eyelids flutter, in the gold light glinting from the ceiling, in the soft restraint of the curtains.

"Ah, here's your father," said the oily voice, "here's the good doctor coming in. It's really surprising that the doctor hasn't told you all this. He knows more about it than I do."

"Well, father's afraid I might compromise him," the other speaker replied gaily. "You know he had me over the coals, swore that I would ruin his practice. Oh, excuse me, I've just seen the Maffre boys, I'll go and shake hands with them."

There was a sound of chairs moving, and the curate saw a tall young man, whose face already looked jaded, walking across the drawing-room. The other person, who had been dealing so lightly with the Rougons, also got up. A lady passing by let him say the sweetest things to her; she laughed, called him "dear Monsieur de Condamin". The priest then recognized the handsome man of sixty pointed out to him by Mouret in the garden of Government House. Monsieur de Condamin came and sat down on the other side of the fire. There he was surprised to see Abbé Faujas, who had been hidden by the back of his chair. But he wasn't in the least put out; he smiled, and said with the ease of the pleasant man:

"Monsieur l'abbé, I think that we've just been confessing without meaning to. It's a great sin, isn't it, to speak ill of one's neighbour? Luckily you were there to give us absolution."

The priest, for all his command of expression, could not help blushing slightly. He perfectly understood that Monsieur de Condamin was reproaching him for listening with breath bated. But Monsieur de Condamin was not the sort to bear an eavesdropper a grudge, far from it. He was delighted to have the priest mildly implicated with himself in this way. That gave him a free hand to talk, and wile away the evening by telling scurrilous stories about the people there. He knew no better treat. This priest, freshly come to Plassans, seemed to him a first-rate audience, all the more so as he had a nasty face, the face of a man fit to hear anything, and was wearing a cassock really far too shabby for it to matter if one did indulge in a few confidences.

After a quarter of an hour, Monsieur de Condamin had settled

down to it very comfortably. He was explaining Plassans to Abbé Faujas with all the politeness of a man of the world.

"You are a stranger in our midst, Monsieur l'abbé," he was saying. "I should be delighted if I could be of some help to you. Plassans is a little town where one manages to find a niche eventually. I myself come from the Dijon neighbourhood. And I can tell you, when I was appointed Keeper of Woods and Waters here, I hated the place, I was bored to death. It was just before the Empire. After the *coup d'état* of '51 especially, life wasn't at all cheerful in the provinces, I can tell you. In this department, people were scared. The mere sight of a police uniform would have sent them into their holes. But gradually things calmed down and they went back to the usual little round, and, faith, I too became resigned. I pass my time in the open air, go for long rides on horse-back, and I have made some friends."

He lowered his voice and went on in a confidential tone:

"If you'll take my advice, monsieur l'abbé, you'll walk warily. What a wasps' nest I nearly fell into, you can't imagine. You see, Plassans is divided into three quite distinct parts. There is the old quarter, where you will only take your alms and your consolations; the St. Mark quarter, home of the local nobility, a boring, bitter place, where you can't be too much on your guard; and then there's the new town, still going up round Government House, the only possible, the only decent one of the three. Well, I was fool enough to start life down in the St. Mark quarter, as I thought my connections indicated. Alas, all I could find down there were dowagers as dry as sticks, and marquises preserved in beggary. Everybody bewailing the days when Bertha span. Never a gathering, not one little party; just a rumbling conspiracy against the contented times in which we live. I nearly compromised myself, take my word for it. Péqueur laughed at me—Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, our sub-prefect—you know him? Well, so then I crossed over to the other side of Sauvairé Place and took a flat there, on the Square. You see, at Plassans, the ordinary people don't count at all, and it's impossible to clean the past off the nobility. The only tolerable folk are the newcomers, a handful of delightful people who take much trouble for the local men. Our little world of officials is very contented. We live to ourselves as we please, without bothering about the inhabitants, just as if we had pitched our tents in conquered territory."

He gave a little laugh of satisfaction, stretched himself out further, turning the soles of his shoes up to the fire. Then he took a glass of

... from the tray of a passing servant, drank slowly, still watching Abbé Faujas out of the corner of his eye. The curate felt that politeness demanded a word from himself.

"This house seems very agreeable," he said, half turning towards the green drawing-room, where the conversation was warming up.

"Yes, yes," replied Monsieur de Condamin, pausing now and then for a sip of his punch; "the Rougons make us forget Paris. You wouldn't think you were at Plassans here. It's the only *salon* where one enjoys oneself, because it's the only one where all opinions rub elbows together. Péqueur has very pleasant gatherings too. All this must cost the Rougons quite a bit, and they have no official expenses like Péqueur; but they've got something better—the taxpayers' pockets."

This little joke delighted him. He put his empty glass up on the mantelpiece and bent over, drawing nearer:

"What's so amusing are the comedies going on here all the time. If only you knew the actors! You see Madame Rastoil over there, between her two daughters, that lady of about forty-five, the one with a face like a bleating sheep? Well, did you notice the way her eyes flickered, when Delangre came and sat down opposite her? The gentleman with a face like Punch, over there on the left. They were intimately acquainted some ten years ago. People say that he's the father of one of the two girls, though they don't really remember which. And what makes it more amusing is that, about the same time, Delangre had a little trouble with *his* wife. It's said that his daughter really owes herself to a painter whom everyone in Plassans knows."

Abbé Faujas had felt it incumbent upon him to put on a solemn expression while hearing confidences such as these. His eyes were completely closed, he did not appear to be listening now. Monsieur de Condamin went on to justify himself:

"If I venture to talk in this way about Delangre, it's because I know him very well. He's a devilishly able sort of man. I believe his father was a bricklayer. Fifteen years ago he used to accept small briefs which the other lawyers wouldn't touch. Madame Rastoil lifted him out of poverty. She even used to send him winter wood-firing, to keep him nice and warm. It was thanks to her that he won his first cases. Then also, Delangre was clever enough in those days to declare no political opinions. And so, in '52, when they were casting about for a mayor, they at once thought of him. He was the only man who could take office without alarming one out of the three

quarters in the town. Since then everything has gone well with him. He has a splendid future. But unfortunately he doesn't get on with Péqueur; they're always squabbling over trifles."

He stopped; he had seen the tall young man, his previous companion, coming back to them.

"Monsieur Guillaume Porquier," he said, introducing him to the priest, "son of Dr. Porquier."

Then, when Guillaume had sat down, he asked him with a sarcastic laugh:

"Well, were there any good looks to be seen in the next room?"

"Oh indeed, none at all," answered the young man in a mocking voice. "I saw the Paloques, husband and wife. Madame Rougon is always trying to tuck them behind a curtain to avoid something awful happening. A woman with child saw them one day in Sauvaire Place, and nearly gave birth on the spot. And Paloque keeps his eyes glued on the presiding judge Rastoil, no doubt hoping to kill him by suppressed fright. You know, that ghastly old Paloque expects to be buried as presiding judge himself."

And they made merry. Paloque's ugliness was the theme of endless jokes in the official circle. Porquier's son then went on in a lower voice:

"I also saw Monsieur de Bourdeu. Don't you think the gentleman has grown even thinner since the Marquis of Lagrifoul was elected? Bourdeu can't bear life as an ex-prefect, so the aggrieved Orleanist has gone over to help the Legitimists, hoping that this move will lead straight to the Chamber of Deputies, where he could pick up that much regretted prefect's post again. And he's dreadfully hurt because they preferred to elect the Marquis, who's just a fool, an utter ass, and doesn't know the first thing about politics, whereas he, Bourdeu, is able, very able."

"What a bore old Bourdeu is with that buttoned-up frock-coat of his and that doctrinaire's pancake hat!" said Monsieur de Condamin, giving a shrug of his shoulders. "People like him, if they were allowed to, would turn France into a college of lawyers and diplomats, and what a dull time of it we should have, I promise you. —Ah, I wanted to tell you, Guillaume; I've been hearing things about you. A pretty life you're leading, they say."

"I?" laughed the young man.

"Yes, you, my buck. Furthermore, it was your papa who told me. He's very upset; says you've been gambling, spending your nights at the club and elsewhere too. Is it true that you found a low-down café

and the prison where you go and raise hell with a whole gang of swags? I was even told . . ."

Seeing two ladies come in, Monsieur de Condamin went on in a low whisper, speaking into the ear of Guillaume, who nodded again and again and guffawed. Then the young man bent across in his turn, no doubt to add a few details. And the pair of them, heads close together, and eyes a-glitter, spent a long time gloating over this story which was too risky for the ladies.

Meanwhile Abbé Faujas was still sitting there, but he was no longer listening. He was watching the mayor, Monsieur Delangre, who was very mobile in the green drawing-room and profuse with his compliments. The sight absorbed him so much that he did not see Abbé Bourrette waving to him to come. The rector had to come over and touch him on the arm, and ask him to follow him. He led Faujas into the card room, with the guarded manner of a man who has something awkward to impart.

"My friend," he murmured, when they were alone in a corner, "you are not to blame, it's your first visit here, but I must warn you that you have heavily compromised yourself by talking so long with the people you have just left."

Abbé Faujas looked at him in great surprise.

"These people are not well thought of. Of course, I don't mean to judge them, nor do I want to speak ill of anyone. But out of friendship for you, I give you warning, that's all."

He tried to move away, but Abbé Faujas detained him, and spoke earnestly.

"You disturb me, dear Monsieur Bourrette. Please, please explain yourself. Surely, without saying any ill, you can make your meaning plainer."

"Well!" the old priest continued, after hesitating: "the young man, son of Dr. Porquier, is a sore trial to his honourable father, and is setting the worst example to young students in Plassans. He has left nothing but debts in Paris, and is turning the whole town here upside-down. As for Monsieur de Condamin——"

He stopped again, embarrassed by the dreadful things he had to tell. His eyelids lowered.

"Monsieur de Condamin is a very light talker, and I am afraid he has no moral sense. He spares no one with his tongue and scandalizes every honourable heart. And—well, I hardly know how to tell you, but they say he has made a dishonourable marriage. You see that young woman of under thirty over there, with so many people round

her? Well, one day he brought her home to Plassans, from where one can hardly tell. And from the moment she arrived, she was ²¹¹ powerful here. It was she who contrived to get her husband and Dr. Porquier decorated. She has friends in Paris. Now please don't repeat all this. Madame de Condamin is very kind, very charitable. I go to see her sometimes and would indeed be sorry if she thought that I was her enemy. If she has faults to be forgiven, our duty is to help her, is it not, to come back to the right path. But her husband, between ourselves, is an unpleasant man. Be cold with him."

Abbé Faujas looked the worthy Bourrette straight in the eyes. He had just noticed that Madame Rougon was observing them from a distance and looking thoughtful.

"Was it not Madame Rougon who asked you to give me this good advice?" he abruptly asked the old priest.

"Well! How did you know that?" exclaimed Bourrette in great astonishment. "She asked me not to mention her name; however, since you have guessed . . . she's a good creature, and would be very sorry to see a priest appearing to disadvantage in her house. Unfortunately she is obliged to receive all sorts of people."

Abbé Faujas expressed his thanks and promised to be prudent. None of the card-players around had looked up. He returned to the large drawing-room, where again he felt that he was in hostile company. The coldness, the silent contempt he found more marked. Skirts swept aside as he passed, as though he might soil them; the black coats turned away, with little jeering laughs. But he remained proudly calm. In the corner of the room where Madame de Condamin was the centre of a group, he thought he heard the word *Besançon* spoken pointedly. So he walked straight towards the group, but as he came near, the conversation broke off, and all eyes turned upon him, shining with malicious curiosity. They had certainly been talking about him, telling some vile tale. Then as he stood there, behind Monsieur Rastoin's daughters, who had been with him, he heard the younger girl ask her sister:

"But what did he do at *Besançon*, this priest ~~there~~ about?"

"Well, if he laughs with Monsieur de Condamin, then there's good reason to mistrust him."

This gossip between the two girls brought the perspiration to his brow. He did not flinch, but his lips compressed, his cheeks turned earthy and pale. And now he could hear everyone in the drawing-room talking about the rector whom he had strangled, and the shady affairs that he had been concerned with. Facing him, Monsieur Delangre and Dr. Porquier looked stern; Monsieur de Bourdeu was pouting disdainfully, as he talked in a subdued voice with a lady; Monsieur Maffre, the police magistrate, was looking at him from under his brows, sanctimoniously, sniffing at long range, before making up his mind to bite; and at the other end of the room the Paloques, husband and wife, that pair of monsters, thrust out their faces, seamed with gall, shining with evil pleasure at all the cruel things that voices were whispering round. Abbé Faujas retreated slowly, as he saw Madame Rastoil, standing a few steps away, returning to her seat between her two daughters, as though she would protect them with her wing, guard them from contact with this man. He leaned upon the piano which he found behind him and stood there, head erect, face hard and still, like a face of stone. A plot was abroad, no doubt of it. He was being treated like an outcast.

Standing motionless, scanning the drawing-room with eyes half-closed, the priest almost started, but controlled himself immediately. He had just caught sight of Abbé Fenil, lounging in an armchair behind a regular barricade of petticoats, smiling a discreet smile. Their eyes met, for a few seconds they gazed on each other with the dire look of two duellists joining in battle to the death. Then there was a rustling of silk, and again the vicar-general was lost to sight behind the frills and flounces of the ladies.

Meanwhile Félicité had been skilfully manoeuvring so as to reach the piano. There she installed the elder of the Rastoil girls, who sang romances agreeably. As the music began, and she was free to speak without being heard, Félicité drew Abbé Faujas into the recess of a window.

"What have you done to Abbé Fenil?" she asked.

They went on talking in a low undertone. The priest at first feigned surprise, but after Madame Rougon had murmured a few words with repeated shrugs of her shoulders, he seemed to give way and talk. The two of them smiled, and appeared to be exchanging polite nothings. But the flashing of their eyes belied such commonplace interplay. Then the piano stopped, and Mademoiselle Rastoil

was called upon to sing *The Soldier's Dove*, which was much in vogue at the time.

"You have made a most unfortunate beginning," Félicité murmured. "Your failure is complete, I advise you not to come back here for some time. You must make yourself liked, do you hear? Strong measures would be disastrous for you."

Abbé Faujas reflected.

"You say that these vile stories must have been spread by Abbé Fenil?" he asked.

"Oh, he's far too cunning to come out into the open like that; he must have whispered these things in the ears of his penitents. I don't know whether he has guessed who you are, but he fears you, that's certain; he will fight you with every conceivable weapon. The worst is that he is confessor to all the best people in the town. It was he who secured the nomination of the Marquis of Lagrifoul."

"I was wrong to come to this reception," the priest let slip.

Félicité's lips compressed. Then she went on quickly:

"You were wrong to compromise yourself with such a man as Condamin. I myself have acted for the best. When my Paris correspondent—you know whom I mean—wrote to me, I thought I was being helpful in inviting you. I imagined you would know how to make friends for yourself here. It was a first step. But instead of trying to please, you are setting everyone against you. You will excuse my frankness, but I really think you are turning your back on success. You have made nothing but mistakes—going to live with my son-in-law, shutting yourself indoors, wearing a cassock which is the joke of the street-boys."

Abbé Faujas could not conceal a gesture of impatience. He merely replied:

"Your good advice will be useful. Only, don't help me, that would spoil everything."

"Yes, that is a wise line to take," said the old lady. "Don't return here till you triumph. And one last word, monsieur. The person in Paris is very anxious that you should succeed, and that is why I am taking an interest in you. Well then, listen to me, and don't make yourself a thundercloud. Be amiable, win the women's hearts. Remember that: you must win the women's hearts if you want Plassans to be yours."

Mademoiselle Rastoil was striking the last chord; the music ended. There was discreet applause. Madame Rouget had departed.

the priest to go and congratulate the singer. Then she took her
and in the centre of the drawing-room to shake hands with her
guests who were beginning to leave. It was eleven o'clock. Faujas was
quite annoyed when he discovered that the worthy Bourrette had
taken advantage of the music to slip away. He was expecting to
leave in his company, and so make a suitable exit. But now, to
depart alone would mean complete failure; the story would go
round the town next day that he had been put to the door. Again he
withdrew into a window recess and looked for a chance, for some
means to make an honourable retreat. Meanwhile the drawing-room
was emptying gradually; only a few ladies remained. And then he
noticed one who was very simply dressed. It was Madame Mouret,
made younger-looking by two slightly waved bandeaux in her hair.
He was greatly struck by her quiet face, with two large dark eyes
that seemed to lie sleeping there. He had not noticed her once that
evening; no doubt she had stayed in a corner without moving,
annoyed to be wasting time in this way doing nothing, with her
hands folded in her lap. As he was looking at her, she rose to say
goodbye to her mother.

Her mother was now enjoying one of her keenest pleasures, the
sight of all the fine company in Plassans bowing and curtsying as
they went their way, expressing thanks for her punch, for her green
drawing-room, and the pleasant hours that they had spent in her
house; and she was thinking how, in old days, all this fine company
used to trample on her flesh, as she crudely put it, whereas now, at
this hour, even the wealthiest could not find smiles too sweet to
thank their dear Madame Rougon.

"Ah, madame," murmured Maffre, the police magistrate, "here
one forgets the passing of hours."

"Only you know what entertaining means in this land of wolves,"
whispered pretty Madame de Condamin.

"We are expecting you to dine tomorrow," said Monsieur
Delangre. "But pot luck, you know; we don't do things in style
like you."

Marthe had to make her way through this scene of triumph to
reach her mother. She embraced her and was withdrawing, when
Félicité detained her, while her eyes sought for someone in the
room. Then, seeing Abbé Faujas, she said with a laugh:

"Good abbé, are you a gallant man?"

The priest bowed.

"Then be so kind as to escort my daughter, for you live in the

same house; that will not put you out of the way, and there is one stretch of lane where the dark is intimidating."

Marthe began assuring them in her quiet way that she wasn't a little girl, and was not at all nervous. But her mother insisted and said that she would feel the easier for an escort, so she accepted the priest's kind company. Félicité saw them to the top of the stairs and, before they went down, again smilingly whispered in the priest's ear:

"Remember what I said: you must win the women's hearts if you want Plassans to be yours."

CHAPTER SEVEN

MOURET was still awake when Marthe returned that night, and he pressed her with questions, being eager to learn all that had happened during the evening. Her answer was that everything had gone just as usual and that she had noticed nothing out of the ordinary. She simply added that Abbé Faujas had brought her home and talked with her about unimportant things. Mouret was quite annoyed by what he called her "indolence".

"Why, even if there was murder at your mother's," he said, digging his head into the pillow with a furious look, "the news certainly wouldn't get to me through you."

And next day, when he came home for dinner, he called out to Marthe as soon as he caught sight of her:

"I knew it, I knew it; much you see with those eyes of yours, good wife! Yes, it's just like you. Staying the whole evening in a *salon* without even suspecting what folks around you are saying and doing. Why, the whole town's talking about it, do you hear that? Not a step could I take without meeting someone who was talking about it."

"About what, dear?" asked Marthe in surprise.

"Why, Abbé Faujas' grand success. He was put to the door of the *salon* in green."

"No, dear, really and truly; I saw nothing like that."

"There! what did I tell you? You see nothing at all! Do you know what this priest did at Besançon? He strangled a rector or he committed a forgery—they're not absolutely sure about details. But no matter. Apparently they told him off properly. He was livid. That's put paid to him."

Marthe looked down, leaving her husband free to triumph over this set-back for the priest. And Mouret's delight was obvious.

"I stick to my original idea," he went on. "Your mother must be up to something with him. Oh, so nice she was, I was told. It was

... followed, he definitely stood up for Faujas. And as he
joined to meet several people whom he heartily disliked—
Monsieur de Bourdeu, Monsieur Delangre and Dr. Porquier, he was
in his praise of the priest, just to be different from them, just to
annoy them and startle them. If he was to be believed, Abbé Faujas
was a very remarkable man, showing great courage, and great
simplicity in poverty. And there must be some very, very malicious
tongues about. Then he slipped in some hints about the people
entertained by the Rougons, a pack of humbugs, hypocrites and
conceited fools, who were afraid to see honest virtue shining out.
And sometimes, forgetting that Marthe had heard a very different
tune from him, he would say to her:

"Now isn't it pitiful to see people who have filched their money
goodness knows where, all making a set against a poor man who
hasn't even the francs for a barrow-load of logs! No, really, I find it
disgusting. Why, dammit, I can vouch for the man. I know what he
does, what sort he is; he's living in my house. And I don't mince my
words, I treat them as they deserve when I meet them. And I shan't
stop there, either. I want this priest to be my friend. I want to walk
round Sauvaire Place with his arm in mine, just to show that I'm not
afraid to be seen with him, rich and honest as I may be. And
first of all, let me recommend you to be very kind to these poor
people."

At all this Marthe smiled discreetly. She was glad to see the kindly
attitude her husband was taking up towards their tenants. Rose was
told to be obliging. If it was raining any morning, she might offer
to do Madame Faujas' shopping. But no, Madame Faujas still
refused any help from the cook. However, she was no longer as stiff
and silent as she had been at first. One morning she happened to
meet Marthe coming down from the attic where the fruit was
stored: she chatted a little, unbent so far as to accept two beautiful
pears. And these two pears were the beginning of closer acquaintance.

And Abbé Faujas, too, no longer glided quite so quickly up and
down the stairs. The rustle of his cassock on the steps was a cue for
Mouret, and almost every day now found him standing at the foot of
the staircase, glad, as he said, to walk a step or two with the priest. He
thanked him for the little attention paid to his wife and at the same
time contrived to ask him cunningly whether he would be going back
to the Rougons. The priest began smiling; he confessed without any
embarrassment that he was not used to the social world. Mouret was
delighted, thinking that he perhaps had something to do with this

decision of his tenant. So then he began thinking of winning him over completely from the green *salon*, and of keeping the priest for himself. So in the evening when Marthe told him that Madame Faujas had accepted two pears, he saw in this a happy chance to further his plans.

"Aren't they really lighting any fire up on the second floor in this cold weather?" he asked, when Rose was in the room.

"Why, monsieur," answered the cook, who understood that the question was meant for her, "that wouldn't be easy, seeing that I've never noticed the tiniest bundle of wood going upstairs. Unless they're burning their four chairs, or Madame Faujas is taking wood up in her basket."

"It's wrong of you to laugh, Rose," said Marthe. "The poor things must be shivering in such large rooms."

"I should think so," said Mouret. "Last night there were fourteen degrees, and people are worrying about the olive trees. Our water jug froze upstairs. But here, the room is small; you get warm at once."

The dining-room was in fact well furnished with draught excluders which stopped the tiniest draught from passing through cracks in the woodwork. And a large porcelain stove kept up bath heat in the room. In winter the children used to do their reading or playing round the table; while Mouret, when waiting for bedtime, used to make his wife take a hand at picquet, which for her was torture. For a long time she had refused to play cards, saying that he knew no games. But Mouret had taught her to play picquet, and now she was resigned to it.

"I'll tell you what," he went on, "we ought to ask the Faujas to come down and spend the evening here. In that way they'll get some warmth for at least two or three hours. Besides, they'll be company for us and we shall be less bored. So ask them, Marthe; they won't refuse."

Next day Marthe met Madame Faujas in the hall and gave her the invitation. The old lady accepted on the spot in her son's name without the least embarrassment.

"It's extraordinary that she didn't pull any faces," said Mouret. "I thought it would take more asking than that. The priest's beginning to see that it's a mistake to play lone wolf."

That evening, Mouret wanted the table to be cleared early. He had brought out a bottle of "cooked" wine, and bought some little cakes. Though he wasn't lavish, he wanted to show that the Rougès

are not the only people who knew how to do things. The couple came down about eight. Abbé Faujas had a new cassock on. This amazed Mouret so much that he could only stammer out a few words in answer to the priest's polite remarks.

"Not at all, monsieur l'abbé; the pleasure is entirely ours. Come along, children, let's have some chairs."

They all sat round the table. The room was overheated, as Mouret had filled the stove too high, just to show that one log more or less didn't matter to him. Abbé Faujas was very gentle; he patted Désirée on the head, asked the two boys about their studies. Marthe, who was knitting a stocking, looked up now and then, surprised to hear the easy modulations of this unfamiliar voice, which she was unused to hear in the oppressive silence of the dining-room. She looked directly into the priest's strong face, at his square-cut features, then again bent her head, without concealing her interest in this man who was so strongly made and so gentle, whom she knew to be quite poor. Mouret, not very politely, was feasting his eyes on the new cassock. He could not help saying, with a sly little laugh:

"You know, monsieur l'abbé, you shouldn't have dressed up to come to us. We're simple folk, as you know very well."

Marthe blushed. But the priest smilingly told them that he had bought the cassock that very day. He had kept it on to please his mother, who thought he looked finer than any king in his new garb.

"Isn't that so, mother?"

Madame Faujas nodded; her eyes still dwelt on her son. She had taken a chair opposite to him, and under the bright light of the lamp she looked and looked at him in ecstasy.

Then they began talking about all sorts of things. Abbé Faujas seemed to have lost his gloomy coldness of manner. He remained grave, but his graveness was obliging now, warm with fellow-feeling. He listened to Mouret, had an answer for the most trifling subject, and showed interest in his gossip. Mouret was now explaining his way of life:

"And so," he concluded, "we spend our evenings as you see. Nothing bothers us now. We don't invite people, because we are better so, just our family circle. Every evening, I play a hand at picquet with the wife. It's an old habit, otherwise I would be long in getting to sleep."

"But we musn't disturb you," exclaimed Abbé Faujas. "I beg of you not to put yourselves out on our account."

But you're not disturbing us at all; it's a pleasure for us. Besides, I found it, I'm losing; Madame Faujas can't refuse me a game." When they had accepted and retired upstairs, Mouret grumbled about his defeat and made excuses. He was furious.

"I'm sure the old lady isn't as strong as I am," he said to his wife. "But what a sharp pair of eyes! You'd think she was cheating, 'pon my word. We'll see about that tomorrow."

So after this, every evening regularly the priest and his mother came down to spend an hour or two with the Mourets. A tremendous battle began between the old lady and her landlord. She seemed to be toying with him, letting him win just enough not to lose heart, which made him smoulder with fury, all the more because he fancied himself quite a pretty hand at picquet. And while he was dreaming of beating her for weeks on end, without letting her take a single game, she remained beautifully cool. Her square peasant face remained unexpressive, her coarse hands laid the cards down with a strong machine-like precision. By eight o'clock every evening, they were both in their chairs at the end of the table, settling down to their game; they hardly stirred.

Sitting at the other end of the table, each on their side of the stove, Abbé Faujas and Marthe seemed to be left all alone. The curate had the scorn of a man and a priest for women. He kept them at arm's distance, like some obstacle to be ashamed of, unworthy of the strong. And in spite of himself, this scorn often came through in a rugged word. And then Marthe, seized with a strange uneasiness, looked up in one of those sudden alarms that make us look behind, to see whether some enemy is not lurking, ready to strike. And there were other times when, even in the middle of a laugh, she stopped herself abruptly, noticing his cassock; she stopped in embarrassment, surprised to find herself chatting like this with a man not as other men. Intimacy between them was slow in coming.

Abbé Faujas never questioned Marthe directly about her husband, her children and her house. But none the less, little by little, he got to know the smallest details about their past and their present life. Every evening, while Mouret and Madame Faujas were battling hard, he learned some fresh detail. One evening, he made mention of the fact that husband and wife were astonishingly alike.

"Yes," Marthe answered with a smile, "when we were twenty, people took us for brother and sister. And to some extent that helped to decide us to marry. People kept joking about it, standing us side by side, telling us that we would make a very nice couple. The

likeness between us was so striking that worthy Monsieur Compan, though he knew us, even hesitated about marrying us."

She paused for a moment, feeling constrained, guessing that the priest knew their family history, so well-known in Plassans. The Macquarts were an illegitimate branch of the Rougon family.

"But you are cousins, aren't you?" said the priest.

"Yes, we are," she replied, blushing slightly. "My husband is a Macquart, and I am a Rougon."

"The most curious thing," she went on, to hide her embarrassment, "is that we both resemble our grandmother. My husband's mother passed this likeness on to him, while to me it came from further back. It seems to have skipped my father."

Whereupon the priest cited a similar example in his own family. He had a sister who apparently was the living likeness of his mother's grandmother. The resemblance in this case had skipped two generations. And his sister took after her forbear in everything—her character, habits, even her gestures and the sound of her voice.

"It's like me," said Marthe. "When I was small, I used to hear people say: 'She's the living image of her aunty Dide.' The poor woman is now in the asylum at Les Tulettes; she was never very strong in the head. But as I grew older, I calmed down, my health got better; though I remember, at twenty, I wasn't too strong: I used to have fits of dizziness, and weird ideas. Why, it still makes me laugh to think what a queer little girl I used to be."

"And your husband?"

"Oh, he takes after his father, a working hat-maker, steady and methodical by nature. Our faces were alike, but it was not so inside. And in course of time, we became just like each other. We had such a peaceful time of it, in our stores in Marseilles! I spent fifteen years there, and they taught me where happiness lay, in my own home, with my children about me."

Yet every time that Abbé Faujas had her talking on this subject he detected a slight vein of resentment in her. She was certainly happy, as she said; but he thought he detected past struggles at work in an unsteady nature which had quietened down as forty drew nearer. He had the picture of a conflict: this wife and husband, related by their faces, made for one another, as friends thought; whereas, deep in their natures, the yeast of illegitimacy was working—there was a quarrel of mixed blood ever in revolt, stirring up antagonisms between two different temperaments. Then he thought he could see the deadening influence of a monotonous life, the

figures toned down by a fortune earned in the space of fifteen years, and quietly lived upon in an unfrequented quarter of a little town. Today, still young though they both were, there seemed to be nothing left in them but ashes. The priest cautiously tried to find out whether Marthe was resigned. He found her very sensible about this.

"No," she said, "I like my home life; my children are all I need. I was never very gay. Only I was just a little bored, that was all. I ought to have found something to occupy my mind, but I didn't. And would it have helped? Perhaps it would have told on my head. I couldn't even read a novel without getting frightful headaches; for three nights all the characters used to go dancing together through my brain. No, only sewing has never been a strain to me. I stay at home, to keep away from all the rumours out-of-doors, the gossip and silly nonsense that tells on me."

Sometimes she would pause and look at Désirée sleeping with her head on the table, smiling the smile of innocence in her sleep.

"Poor child!" she would murmur. "She can't even sew; she gets giddy at once. She only cares for animals. When she goes and spends a month away with her nurse, she spends all her time in the farm-yard, and comes back to me with rosy cheeks, glowing with health."

She often spoke too of Les Tuilettes, revealing a hidden fear of madness. Abbé Faujas thus sensed a strange uneasiness lurking in this tranquil house. Marthe certainly was fond of her husband in all affection; but in her fondness there was some fear of Mouret's banter and endless fussing. She was also hurt by his selfishness, and by the way he neglected her. She vaguely resented the peaceful calm he spread about her, this happiness which she claimed gave her pleasure. And often, when speaking of her husband, she would say:

"He's very good to us. . . . You ought to hear him shouting sometimes: because he likes everything to be straight and tidy, you see, till it becomes laughable sometimes; he gets angry if a flower-pot is moved in the garden, or a toy left lying on the floor. Apart from that, he has every right to live as he likes. I know that they say things, because he has saved a bit of money and still makes good deals, now and then, and snaps his fingers at the talk. They also chaff him about me. They say that he is mean, that he keeps me to the house, that he keeps me short, even of boots. It isn't true. I'm absolutely free. Of course, he likes to see me at home when he gets in, instead of finding me gadding, taking walks or paying visits. Besides, he knows my tastes. What would I be wanting away from the house?"

When she was defending Mouret against the gossip in Plassans, she would suddenly begin to speak more eagerly, as if she felt a need to defend him also from secret fault-finding welling from inside herself. And then she would come back with nervous uneasiness to the question of life in the town outside. She seemed to be taking refuge within the narrow walls of the dining-room, in the old garden with the tall box hedges, as though seized with fear of the unknown, mistrusting her own strength, dreading some catastrophe. Then she would smile at these childish fears, shrug her shoulders, turn again to the stocking she was knitting, the old shirt she might be darning. And then, all that the priest had before him was a cold merchant's wife, with a fresh complexion, pale-eyed, who gave her house the fragrance of cool linen, of flowers gathered in the shade.

Two months went by in this way. Abbé Faujas and his mother were now a part of Mouret's daily life. In the evenings, each had their seat waiting at the table; the lamp stood in the same place; the same words fell from the players in the same silences, in the same subdued talk between Marthe and the priest. And, when Madame Faujas had not scored a too ferocious victory, Mouret found his tenants 'very proper people'.

All the curiosity of the retired merchant with little to do had been soothed down by the preoccupation with his evening game of cards. He no longer spied on the priest, saying that he knew him well now, that he considered him a worthy man.

"Ah, easy with that now, easy!" he cried when people attacked Abbé Faujas in his hearing. "There you go beating the bushes, looking for plums in the brambles, when it's so easy to find a simple explanation. Dammit, I know the man to the finger-tips. He's friendly enough to spend every evening with me and my family. No, he's not the sort that's too free with himself, I can see why they don't like him and say he's proud."

Mouret quite enjoyed being the only person in Plassans who could boast that he knew Abbé Faujas; in fact he rather traded on this advantage. Every time he met Madame Rougon, he triumphed, gave her to understand that he had filched her guest. Madame Rougon had to be content with a knowing smile. With his cronies, Mouret became rather more confidential; in an undertone he would say that these confounded priests can't do anything the way other men do. Then he used to hand out little details: how the priest drank, how he talked with women, how he kept his knees apart without ever crossing his legs; mild little anecdotes in which

disclosed the uneasy feelings of a free-thinker confronted with that stentorian cassock curtaining the very heels of his guest.

The evenings went by, and now the first weeks of February had come. In his conversations with Marthe, Abbé Faujas was careful, as it seemed, not to talk religion. Once she had said to him, almost brightly;

"No, monsieur l'abbé, I'm not religious, I don't often go to church. It was this way, you see. When I was in Marseilles, I was always very busy, and now I'm too lazy to go out. Then I must confess to you that I didn't have a religious upbringing. My mother used to say that God came to our house."

The priest slightly bowed in answer, so letting it be understood that he preferred not to talk of such things in such circumstances. However, one evening, he drew a picture of the help past hope that suffering souls find in religion. He was talking about the case of a poor woman who had been driven to suicide by all kinds of troubles.

"She was wrong to give way to despair," said the priest in his deep sonorous voice. "No doubt she was ignorant of the consolations of prayer. Often I have seen women coming to us, broken, crying, and they went away fortified by the resignation vainly sought elsewhere, and a new zest for life. That was because they had knelt down, and joyfully humbled themselves in some quiet corner in church. They came back, they forgot their troubles, they gave themselves to God."

Marthe listened thoughtfully to these words; the last of them had died away on a tone that seemed to tell of more than human felicity.

"Yes, it must mean happiness," she murmured as though she was talking to herself. "I have thought about it at times, but I was always afraid."

The priest only touched very rarely on such subjects. On the other hand, he often had things to say about charity. Marthe was very kind-hearted; tears came to her eyes when she heard of the slightest trouble. The priest seemed to take pleasure in seeing her quivering when stirred to pity. Every evening he had some new moving story to tell; he melted her heart with continual compassion that made her yield entirely. She would let her work fall in her lap, clasp her hands, her face the picture of pain, looking at him, while he went into heart-breaking details about people dying of hunger, about unhappy creatures driven by poverty into evil-doing. And then she was his: he could have done what he liked with her. And

quite often, at the same time, a squabble would break out at the other end of the room between Mouret and Madame Faujas, about a fourteen in kings wrongly declared, or a card picked up when discarding.

It was about the middle of February when a deplorable affair threw the people of Plassans into consternation. It was learned that a band of girls, quite young, children almost, had slipped into vice while scampering about the streets. And it wasn't only a matter between children of the same age; it was said that far more sedate people would also be found implicated. For a whole week, Marthe was very struck by this story which was the talk of the town. She knew one of these wretched girls, a fair-haired little thing whom she had often petted, and a niece to Rose her cook. She couldn't think of this poor little girl, she said, without quivering through and through.

"What a pity," Abbé Faujas said to her one evening, "that there is no religious home here in Plassans, on the model of the one existing at Besançon."

Pressed with questions by Marthe, he explained what sort of a home it was. It was a kind of crèche for the daughters of work people, for girls of eight to fifteen, left alone at home by parents who had to go out to their work. They were kept occupied during the daytime with sewing work; then when evening came, they were handed over to the parents on their way home. In this way the poor children grew up far from temptations, surrounded by exemplary care. Marthe found this scheme generous. And gradually she became so filled with this idea that she could talk of nothing but the need of a similar home for Plassans.

"It would be placed under the protection of the Virgin," Abbé Faujas hinted. "But oh, what difficulties there would be to overcome! You don't know all the trouble it takes to set the smallest work of that kind on foot. To make a success of such work as this, we should need a warm motherly heart and much devotion."

Marthe looked down, glanced at Désirée sleeping beside her, and felt the tears brimming in her eyes. She asked about the steps to be taken, the initial outlay, the annual expenses.

"Will you help me?" she suddenly asked the priest one evening.

Abbé Faujas gravely took her by the hand, and held it a moment in his own, murmuring that she had one of the best souls he had ever known. He accepted, but he counted absolutely on her; there was

little that he could do. And she would be the one to ask for subscriptions in the town, to undertake, in brief, to bring ladies together in a committee, to gather up the strings in a work as tricky and troublesome as a public appeal for charity. And he gave her an appointment for the very next morning at St. Saturnin, to put her in touch with the architect of the diocese, who was far better able than he was to give her an idea of the expenses involved.

That evening Mouret, as he went to bed, was in cheerful vein. He hadn't given Madame Faujas a single game.

"You're looking very happy, my dear," he said. "Ah, you saw how I smashed that quint of hers? It gave the old lady such a turn."

Noticing with surprise that Marthe was taking a silk dress out of a wardrobe, he asked her if she was expecting to go out the next day. He hadn't heard a word, downstairs.

"Yes," she answered. "I have people to see; I have an appointment with Abbé Faujas at the church for reasons I'll explain."

He stood stock still in front of her, staring in amazement, wondering whether it was all a joke. But he didn't get angry. In his bantering tone, he just said quietly:

"Well, well, that's a new one. So you're taking up with the cloth now."

CHAPTER EIGHT

NEXT day, Marthe went first of all to see her mother, and told her about the good cause that she had at heart. But as she listened, the old lady kept nodding her head and smiling, till Marthe almost lost her temper; she told her mother that she had little charity.

"This is Abbé Faujas' idea." Félicité came out with the remark rather suddenly.

"Yes it is," murmured Marthe, taken aback. "We have talked about it a good deal together. How did you know?"

Madame Rougon gave the merest shrug of her shoulders, and nothing more definite by way of reply. Then she began talking with some vivacity:

"Well, dearest, how right you are! You ought to have something to do, and you have hit on a very good idée. I really don't like to see you shut away in that quiet grave of a house. But you mustn't count on me, my dear, I won't have anything to do with your scheme. If I did, people would say that I was doing everything, that we had put our heads together and were imposing our ideas on the town. No, my wish is that you should have all the credit for your good work. I will help you with my advice, if you agree to that, but further I will not go."

"But I was counting on your joining the organizing committee," said Marthe, who was a little scared by the idea of undertaking such a heavy task alone.

"No, no, if I took a hand that would spoil things, I assure you. On the contrary, you should let it be clearly known that I can't join the committee, that I declined because I was busy. And you should even convey the impression that I have no faith in your plan. And you'll see, that will settle it. Go and see Madame Rastoil, Madame de Condamin, Madame Delangre; go also and see Madame Paloque, but last of all. She will be flattered and will be of more use to you than the others. And if you happen to be in a quandary, come and consult me."

... saw her daughter to the top of the stairs. Then, looking her light in the face, and smiling her angular elderly smile, she

"And how is the dear priest; well?"

"Very well," Marthe calmly replied. "I'm just going to St. Saturnin, where I have to see the architect to the diocese."

Marthe and the priest thought that plans were still too vague for a special meeting with the architect. They merely hoped to contrive a meeting with him on his usual daily visit to St. Saturnin, where as it happened a chapel was undergoing repair. They could consult him there as if by chance. Marthe walked up the nave and caught sight of Abbé Faujas and Monsieur Licutaud talking together on top of a scaffolding. They hastened to come down; one of the priest's shoulders was white with plaster; he was taking an interest in the work of restoration.

At this hour in the afternoon there was no worshipper; the nave and aisles of St. Saturnin were deserted, and cluttered with a confusion of chairs which two beades were noisily tidying away. The masons were shouting up on their ladders, and there was a sound of trowels scraping the walls. The atmosphere was far from religious, and Marthe had not even crossed herself on walking in. She took a chair before the chapel undergoing repair, between Abbé Faujas and Monsieur Licutaud, much as she would have sat down in the architect's office if she had gone to consult him there.

Their talk lasted a good half-hour. The architect proved very obliging; his opinion was that they should not build new premises for the Hospice of the Virgin, as the priest called the establishment under consideration. That would be too costly. It would be preferable to buy some building as it stood and convert it for the purpose. And he even indicated that in the suburbs there was an old boarding-house, taken over subsequently by a fur merchant, which was up for sale. With a few thousands of francs he undertook to convert this tumbledown place completely; he even promised wonders—a nice entrance, spacious rooms, a court-yard planted with trees. Gradually Marthe and the priest began to talk louder as they discussed these details under the echoing vault of the nave, while Monsieur Lieutaud scratched with the tip of his walking-stick on the stone slabs, to give them an idea of the front.

"Very well, that's agreed," said Marthe as she took leave of the architect. "You'll make us a little estimate, so that we know where we stand. And please keep it a secret, won't you?"

after of an hour, she had taken over the whole idea, and she was giving instructions to Marthe. Marthe was about to leave, when Monsieur de Condamin walked in. So she stayed, feeling awkward, not liking to talk of her plan in the presence of the Keeper of Woods and Waters, who they said was implicated in the business of these poor girls which put the whole town to shame.

It was Madame de Condamin who explained the great idea to her husband, and his calm, his moral sentiments proved exemplary. He found the whole thing highly moral.

"This is an idea which could only occur to a mother," he said gravely, and it was impossible to guess whether he wasn't laughing. "Plassans will be in your debt, madame, for clean living."

"Let me confess that I merely took up the idea," answered Marthe, embarrassed by this praise. "I was fired by someone whom I esteem very highly."

"Who was it?" asked Madame de Condamin curiously.

"Abbé Faujas." And then Marthe, very simply, told of her warm admiration for the priest. And she made no mention of the unfavourable rumours going round; she described him as a man deserving the highest respect, one she was happy to afford shelter under her roof. Madame de Condamin followed all this with little approving nods.

"I have always said so," she exclaimed. "Abbé Faujas is a priest of the highest standing. If you knew what spiteful people there are! But since you took him in, people are holding their tongues. That put a stop to all this unpleasant guesswork. So you say the idea originally came from him? We must urge him to come forward. Until then, of course, it is understood that we remain discreet. I assure you, I always liked this priest and stood up for him——"

"I had a talk with him; he seemed to me a very decent chap," interrupted the Keeper of Woods and Waters.

But his wife signed to him to stop. Quite often she treated him like a valet. In this dubious marriage that people criticized, the blame had come to be considered his entirely; the young wife, imported from goodness knew where, had won pardon and popularity with everyone in the town, thanks to her graceful charm and pleasing beauty, qualities more appreciated in the provinces than is sometimes supposed. Monsieur de Condamin understood that his presence was superfluous amid such virtuous conversation.

"I leave you in God's good hands," he said, with a somewhat

ironic air. "I'll go and smoke a cigar. Octavie, don't forget to dress early; we're going to Government House this evening."

When he had gone, the two women talked a little more, going over what had already been said, pitying poor girls who take the wrong turning, working themselves up more and more to shield them from all temptation. Madame de Condamin talked quite eloquently against loose living.

"Well, that's agreed," she said as she shook Marthe's hand for the last time, "I am yours from the first. If you go and see Madame Rastoil and Madame Delangre, tell them that I shall be seeing to everything; all we want from them are their names. My idea's a good one, don't you think? We shan't budge an inch from that. My compliments to Abbé Faujas."

Marthe went off at once to see Madame Delangre, and then on to Madame Rastoil. She found them both polite, but cooler than Madame de Condamin. Both discussed the money aspect; a great deal of money would be needed, public charities would never supply what was required, there was a risk of failure and everybody would laugh. Marthe reassured them, gave them estimates. So then they wanted to know which ladies had already agreed to join the committee. Madame de Condamin's name was received in silence. But then, when they heard that Madame Rougon had declined, they became much more agreeable.

Madame Delangre had received Marthe in her husband's study. She was a little pale woman, meek as a servant, but her extravaganzas of the past were still a tale for tongues in Plassans.

"Why," she murmured at last, "what could be better? It would be a school of virtue for girls of the working class. Many a faint soul would be saved. I cannot say no, because I feel that I would be very useful to you through my husband, whose duties as mayor keep him in constant touch with all people having influence. Only I must ask you to wait till tomorrow before giving you a definite answer. Our position calls for great prudence, and I would like to consult Monsieur Delangre."

In Madame Rastoil, Marthe found a woman just as limp and very prudish, feeling for delicate words to describe these unfortunate girls going astray. She was a plump thing, this one, and she was at work with her needle on a priest's alb, very richly embroidered, as she sat between her two daughters. She had trotted them out as soon as this conversation began.

"I thank you for thinking of me," she said; "but really my hands

are very full. I belong to several committees already, I don't know whether I shall have the time. I may say that the same idea had occurred to me; only, my plan was wider in scope, more comprehensive perhaps. For quite a month I have been meaning to go and see his lordship about it, and never finding a minute. However, we could join forces. I will give you my own point of view, for I think you are wrong on several points. But, since it must be, I shall devote myself once again. Only yesterday my husband was saying to me: 'Really you never think of your own affairs, you are always working for others.' "

Marthe looked at her with curious interest, as she thought of her past liaison with Monsieur Delangre, still a rich vein for talk in the cafés round Sauvaire Place. The wife of the mayor and the wife of the presiding judge, the second especially, had listened with much circumspection when Abbé Faujas' name came up. Marthe even felt slightly offended by this show of mistrust about someone for whom she answered. And so she had emphasized the fine character of the priest; this had compelled the two women to agree on the merits of this priest who lived such a quiet life and supported his mother.

On leaving Madame Rastoil's house, Marthe only had to cross the road to call on Madame Paloque, who lived on the other side of Balande Street. It was seven o'clock, but she wanted to clear off this last visit, though it might mean a scolding from her husband for keeping him waiting. The Paloques were just about to sit down to table in a cold dining-room that spoke of poverty in provincial life—a clean poverty, carefully concealed. Madame Paloque hastily covered over the soup that she was about to serve, annoyed at being caught at table. She was very polite, humble almost, secretly uneasy about this unexpected call. Her husband the judge sat in front of his empty plate with his hands on his knees.

"Little brats!" he cried when Marthe had spoken about the girls in the old town. "Nice things I heard today at the courts. They're a source of corruption for a quite worthy and honourable people. You are wrong, madame, to interest yourself in such pests."

"Besides," said Madame Paloque in her turn, "I very much fear that I can be of no use to you at all. I know no one. My husband would sooner cut off his right hand than ask for the smallest thing. We keep in the background, being disgusted with all the injustice we have seen. We live quietly here, very glad to be forgotten. Why, if my husband was offered promotion now, he would refuse, wouldn't you, dear?"

The judge nodded his head as though to say yes. They exchanged a thin smile, and Marthe sat there not knowing what to say, as she looked at these two dreadful faces, seamed, livid with bile, playing their parts so well in this false comedy of resignation. Then fortunately she remembered her mother's advice.

"But, you know, I was really counting on you," she said, speaking very nicely. "Of course we shall have all these ladies—Madame Delangre, Madame Rastoil, Madame de Condamin: but between ourselves, these ladies will only be lending us their names. I should have liked to find someone really respected, and very devoted, to take a warmer interest in this cause, and my thought was that you would be kind enough to fill that place. Just think how much in our debt Plassans will be, if we succeed with this plan!"

"Surely, surely," murmured Madame Paloque, enchanted with these nice words.

"Then, you're wrong to think that you have no power. Monsieur Paloque is known to be well considered at Government House. Between ourselves, Monsieur Rastoil's seat on the bench will be his one day. Don't attempt to deny it; your merits are well-known, hide yourselves though you may. And just think, here is an excellent opportunity for Madame Paloque to step a little out of the shadows, and show that in her we have a woman with a head and a heart."

The judge fidgetted and fidgetted. He looked at his wife, blinking his eyes.

"Madame Paloque has not refused," he said.

"But of course I haven't," his wife continued. "As you really need me, that settles it. Perhaps I am only going to make another mistake, give myself a deal of trouble and never be rewarded. Ask Monsieur Paloque how much good we have done without saying a word about it. You see where that has brought us. Never mind, we can't change our natures, can we? We shall be dupes to the very end. . . . You can count on my help, dear lady."

The Palokes rose, and Marthe took her leave, thanking them for all their help. She was delayed a moment on the landing by the flounce of her dress, which caught between the banister and the step, and she heard them hard at it behind the door.

"They're asking for you because they need you," the judge was saying in his vinegary voice. "You'll become their beast of burden."

"What of it!" answered his wife. "You don't think they won't pay for it, and all the rest as well!"

When Marthe got home at last, it was nearly eight o'clock.

Mouret had been waiting a good half-hour to sit down to his supper. She dreaded an angry scene. But when she had changed and come downstairs, she found her husband sitting astride a chair, calmly drumming with his fingers on the table. But he gave her a terrible time of it with his bantering and teasing.

"Well, you know, I thought you would be spending the night in a confessional," he said. "Now that you've started going to church, you really must give me warning, so that I can have my supper out when you're invited by the clergy."

All through supper his jokes in this vein continued. Marthe minded it far more than an actual quarrel. Two or three times she gave him an imploring look and begged him to let her be. But this only added fuel to the flames. Octave and Désirée laughed. Serge said nothing, siding with his mother. When they were at dessert, Rose came in, in a great state, saying that Monsieur Delangre was there, and wanted to speak with Madame Mouret.

"Ah! so you're in with the town authorities as well?" said Mouret, jeering.

Marthe went to the drawing-room to receive Monsieur Delangre. The mayor, very kind, gallant almost, told her that he could not wait till the next day to congratulate her on her public-spirited scheme. His wife was a little shy; she had been wrong not to accept at once, and he was calling to say in her name that she would be very flattered to join the ladies' committee to organize the Hospice of the Virgin. As for himself, he intended to do his utmost to make a success of such a useful and moral cause.

Marthe saw him to the front door. And there, while Rose held the lamp high to light the pavement, the mayor added:

"Tell Abbé Faujas that I would be very glad to have a talk with him, if he would kindly come to my house. Since he has seen an establishment of this kind at Besançon, he could give me valuable information. I want the town to pay for the premises at least. Goodbye till we meet again, dear lady; all my regards to Monsieur Mouret, whom I don't want to disturb."

At eight o'clock, when Abbé Faujas came downstairs with his mother, Mouret simply laughed and said:

"So you stole my wife today? Well, mind you don't spoil her; don't turn her into a saint."

And with that he plunged into card-playing. He had a terrible revenge to take on Madame Faujas, after three evenings of defeat. Marthe was free to tell the priest of her activities. Her joy was

almost child-like, she was still thrilling from the adventure of an afternoon spent away from the house. The priest made her repeat various details. He promised to go and see the mayor, though he would have preferred to stay well in the background.

"You were wrong to mention my name at the start," he said roughly, when he found her so excited, so open-hearted to him. "But you're like all women, the best causes go to pieces in your hands."

She gazed at him, quite surprised by this cruel outburst, and recoiled, feeling that same sensation of fear that she still had sometimes when she noticed his cassock. It seemed to her as though iron hands were clamped on her shoulders and bending her down. For every priest, woman means the enemy. When he saw that she was shocked by the excessive sternness of his reprimand, he softened down and murmured:

"My thoughts are all on the success of your noble plan. I am afraid of spoiling the success if I take a hand. You know that I am not liked in the town."

When she saw him humbling himself, Marthe assured him that he was mistaken, that all the ladies had had the kindest things to say about him. They knew that he was supporting his mother and leading a retired life deserving all praise. So then, till eleven came, they talked of the great scheme, rehearsing the smallest details. It was a delightful evening.

Mouret had caught one or two words, between hands.

"So," he said, as they went off to bed, "between you you're downing vice. Not a bad notion."

Three days later, the committee of lady patrons was formed. And when the ladies elected Marthe as president, she hastened (acting on the advice of her mother whom she was consulting in secret) to appoint Madame Paloque as treasurer. Both of them went to a deal of trouble, drawing up circulars, attending to a thousand and one details. In the meantime Madame de Condamin was going from Government House to the bishop's palace, and from the palace to see influential people, setting forth with all her charm "this excellent scheme of mine", parading the most adorable gowns, gathering in subscriptions and promises of help. And Madame Rastoi, for her part, most devotedly explained to the priests whom she entertained on Tuesdays, how she had had this idea of saving all these unhappy young children from vice, and was quite satisfied with asking Monsieur Bourrette the rector to make an appeal to the

Joseph to be so kind as to minister to the hospice they were planning to set up. Meanwhile Madame Delangre was explaining confidence to the petty world of officials that the town would have her husband to thank for this hospice, not to speak of their committee-room in the Town Hall where they met and discussed in comfort by his gracious arrangement. Plassans was all astir with this bustle of piety. Soon, this Hospice of the Virgin was all they would talk about. Praise soared and showered; the friends of each lady patron on the committee joined in, every group worked to bring success to the enterprise. Subscription lists circulating in the three-quarters of the town were filled in a week. And as the *Plassans Gazette* published these lists with the sums subscribed, a competition in generosity began, and the best-known families outvied one another.

Meanwhile, in the bustle and din, the name of Abbé Faujas was frequently heard. Though each lady patron on the committee claimed the original idea for her own, none the less it came out that the priest had brought this wonderful scheme from Besançon. Monsieur Delangre said as much in so many words; this was at the session of the Municipal Council, when they voted the purchase of the building indicated by the diocesan architect as being very suitable for inaugurating the Hospice of the Virgin. The night before, the mayor had had quite a long conversation with the priest, and they had parted with many a handshake. The town clerk had even heard them addressing each other as "dear sir". This started a revolution in the priest's favour. From then on, he had partisans to defend him against attacks from his enemies.

The Mourets moreover had now become moral surety for Abbé Faujas. Under Marthe's patronage, named as promoter of a good work though modestly declining paternity, he no longer stepped the streets clinging meekly to the walls. He paraded his new cassock in the full sun, walked in the middle of the road. On his way now from Balande Street to St. Saturnin, already quite a number of hats were doffed, and acknowledged. On Sunday Madame de Condamin detained him after vespers in Bishop's Yard, and talked with him there for a good half-hour.

"Well, monsieur l'abbé," said Mouret to him with a laugh, "behold you in the odour of sanctity now. And to think that, less than six months ago, I was the only one to stand up for you! None the less, if I were you, I should be on your guard. You've still got the palace against you."

CHAPTER NINE

THE month of April was warm. In the evening, after supper, the children left the dining-room to go and play in the garden. As it was stifling at the back of the little room, Marthe and the priest also began going out on to the terrace. They sat a few feet away from the wide-open window, beyond the yellow beam of lamp-light striping the hedges of box. And there in the gathering dusk they talked about the countless things to be done for the hospice. This continued concern with charitable ends gave their talks an added gentleness. Facing them, between Monsieur Rastoil's great pear-trees and the dark chestnuts of Government House, a broad patch of sky reached upwards. The children ran through the arbours at the far end of the garden, while from the dining-room came sounds of brief altercation, voices suddenly raised as Mouret and Madame Faujas, left alone there, industriously played cards.

And sometimes Marthe, softened by the languorous mood of the evening to slower speech, paused as she saw the golden streak of a shooting star. She would smile, her head bent back a little, as she gazed at the sky.

"Another soul from purgatory entering paradise," she murmured. Then, as the priest said nothing, she added:

"How charming they are, these simple beliefs. We should never grow up, monsieur l'abbé."

Now, in the evening, she no longer did the family mending. A lamp would have been needed on the terrace and she preferred the dusk of the warm night about her; she was better so. Besides, she had to go out almost every day, which she found very tiring. After supper, she hadn't the heart to ply the needle. So Rose had to see to the mending as Mouret had complained that all his socks were in holes.

And indeed Marthe was very busy. In addition to committee meetings, where she presided, she had a mass of things on her hands, visits to pay, people to guide and control. She did of course hand

the large rooms in the Town Hall, and yet, in spite of herself, she found she was quivering to the core. This pained her, nor was she sorry to come back to this pain.

Abbé Faujas did not seem to notice this slow awakening at work within her, with each day more and more. He remained for her just a busy obliging man who left heaven aside; the priest in him never came through. Sometimes however her visit would interrupt him during a service for the dead; he would come to her in his surplice, talk for a moment between two pillars, bringing with him a faint smell of incense and candle wax. Her query was often about some mason's account, a request from a carpenter. He would give her exact figures and then return to follow the coffin, while she would stay on there, lingering in the empty nave, where a beadle was putting out the candles. When Abbé Faujas happened to pass across the church with her and bow before the high altar, she now used to bow also, just for decency's sake at first; then this acknowledgement became mechanical and she bowed even when alone. So far this sign of reverence was her only act of devotion. Two or three times she came unawares on days of high ceremony; but when she heard the organ playing and saw the cathedral full of people, she slipped away, seized with fear, not liking to go further than the door.

"Well," Mouret often used to ask with his jeering laugh, "when's it to be, your first communion?"

He still went on pelting her with his chaff. She never answered back. She used to look steadily at him, and a light flashed in her eyes when he went too far. Gradually, his voice became sharper, he did not feel like bantering with her. And then, after a month, he began to lose his temper.

"What's the sense of getting mixed up with these clergybobs!" he grumbled, on days when he did not find his supper ready. "You're always out now, you can't give an hour to the house. I wouldn't mind so much if everything wasn't going downhill. But my mending's never done, the table isn't even laid by seven. Rose is unmanageable, and the house is going to the dogs."

He would pick up a forgotten duster, put away a wine-bottle lying about, wipe the dust off the furniture with his fingers, working up his temper more and more and shouting:

"Are you expecting me to take a broom, put on a kitchen apron, eh? 'Pon my word, you wouldn't care. You'd let me do the house-work and never even notice. Do you know I spent two hours this

weary indifference. Supper in the evening wasn't worth eating, and there was quarrelling. Rose did as she liked. What's more, she was taking the mistress's side.

Things reached such a point that Mouret, meeting with his mother-in-law, made bitter complaints about Marthe, though he realized that the old lady was not displeased to hear of troubles in his household.

"You surprise me very much," said Félicité. "Marthe used to seem afraid of you. Indeed I found her too weak and obedient. A wife should not tremble in front of her husband."

"Why yes, it was so!" exclaimed Mouret in despair. "To avoid a quarrel she would have sunk into the ground. One look was enough; she did all I wanted. But now it's a different story; I can shout as much as I like, but she goes her own way just the same. True, she doesn't answer back. She doesn't face up to me, but I can see that coming."

Félicité's answer was hypocritical:

"If you like, I'll talk to Marthe, only I might give offence. This sort of thing should be left to husband and wife. I don't feel worried about it; you'll manage your way back to the peaceful life you were so proud of."

Mouret was shaking his head and looking down.

"No, no," he answered. "I know what I'm like: I shout, but it doesn't help. I'm as weak as a child, really. It's wrong to think I've always used the whip-hand with the wife. If she has mostly done what I wanted, it's because she didn't really care, didn't mind doing this rather than that. She may seem gentle, but she's very stubborn, really . . . Well, I'll do what I can to get on the right side of her."

Then, looking up, he added:

"It would have been better if I hadn't told you about this. Don't mention it to anyone, will you?"

The next day Marthe happened to go and see her mother. Félicité, looking prim, said to her:

"It's wrong of you, daughter, to behave badly towards your husband. I saw him yesterday; he's very angry. I know he can be quite absurd, but that's no reason for neglecting your household."

Marthe looked steadily at her mother.

"Ah! he's complaining about me, is he? Well, he might keep his mouth shut; I don't complain about him."

Then she changed the subject. But Madame Rougon brought her back to the question by asking for news about Abbé Faujas.

through the great nave, one pallid beam was dying on the hard oak of the benches and stalls. Marthe had never felt anything like this self-surrender there before; her legs seemed broken with weariness, her hands were so heavy that she clasped them on her lap, to save herself the trouble of lifting them. She drifted off into a doze in which she continued to see and hear, but in a very gentle kind of way. The faint echoes rolling under the vaulting—a chair dropped, the footfall of a late worshipper—moved her, took on a musical sound which touched her very heart; while the last light of day, the shadows stealing up the pillars like coverings of serge, seemed to her like the shimmerings of shot silk, all in a delicious melting mood that seemed to enfold her, and in the folds her own self was dissolving and dying away. Then everything about her was blotted out. She seemed completely happy in something that was nameless.

The sound of a voice aroused her from this ecstasy.

"I am very sorry," said Abbé Faujas. "I saw you here, but I couldn't get away."

On this she seemed to wake with a start. She looked at him. He was in his surplice, standing up in the paling light. His last penitent had just gone, and the empty building was growing more solemn and dark.

"Did you want to speak with me?" he asked.

She made an effort, trying to remember.

"Yes," she murmured, "but I can't quite. . . . Ah yes! it's the façade: Madame de Condamin finds it too mean. Two columns are needed instead of that flat door which doesn't tell at all. A pointed arch could be put in with some stained glass. It would look very nice. You see the idea, don't you?"

He looked down at her with a profound air, his two hands knotted together over his surplice, towering above her, bending his grave face down to her. And she, still seated, without the strength to rise, tripped over her words more and more, as though surprised in some sleep of her will-power which she could not shake off.

"It would mean further expense, it's true. We might just do with soft stone columns, and a simple moulding. We could talk about it to the master mason, if you liked: he would tell us the cost. Only it would be as well to settle his last account beforehand. It's two thousand one hundred francs odd, I think. We've got the funds, Madame Paloque told me so this morning. We can manage it, I think, monsieur l'abbé."

She had bent her head, as though oppressed by the weight of the gaze that she felt upon her. When she looked up again and met the priest's eyes with her own, she clasped her hands together with the gesture of a child asking pardon and burst into sobs. The priest let her cry on, still standing, silent. Then she fell on her knees before him, crying into her cupped hands with which she covered her face.

"Please get up," said Abbé Faujas gently. "It is before God that you must kneel."

He helped her to her feet and sat down beside her. Then, in low voices, they talked a long time. Full darkness had now come, the night lights with their little gold points were dotting the dark recesses of the cathedral. Only the murmur of their voices faintly rippled the air by St. Aurelia's chapel. Like a full stream flowing on and on, never pausing, the words of the priest could be heard after each faint, broken answer from Marthe. When at last they rose, he seemed to be refusing some favour that she was asking insistently. As he led her towards the door, he raised his voice:

"No, I cannot, really," he said. "It will be better for you to have Abbé Bourrette."

"But I stand in great need of your advice," murmured Marthe imploringly. "It seems to me that with you everything would become easy for me."

"You are mistaken," he answered in a harsher voice. "On the contrary, I am afraid that my spiritual guidance might be harmful for you at the beginning. Abbé Bourrette is the priest for you, believe me. Later on, perhaps I may give you a different answer."

Marthe obeyed. Next day, the women worshippers at St. Saturnin were greatly surprised to see Madame Mouret come and kneel down at Abbé Bourrette's confessional. Two days later, the sole topic of conversation in Plassans was this conversion. Abbé Faujas' name was mentioned with knowing smiles by certain people; but on the whole, the general impression was excellent and all to the credit of the priest. Madame Rastoil congratulated Madame Mouret in open session of the committee. Madame Delangre saw in it God's first blessing, a reward for the lady patrons in their good works, that the heart of the only one among them who did not worship had been touched. Madame de Condamin took Marthe aside and said to her: "Yes, my dear, you were right; a woman needs in ~~And~~ then, really you know, when one starts going out a bit, ~~church-~~ going ought to come in."

The only thing that caused surprise was this choice of Abbé

note. The good man only heard confession from the little girls. The ladies found him "distinctly dull". At the Rougons' next Thursday, as Marthe had not yet arrived, there was talk about this in a corner of the green drawing-room and it was Madame Paloque's viper-like tongue that had the last word in the gossip.

"Abbé Faujas did well not to keep her for himself," she said, with a little pout that made her even more hideous. "Abbé Bourrette is absolutely harmless and can save anything that comes along."

When Marthe arrived that day, her mother went to meet her, and there was some affectation in the way she tenderly embraced her under the eyes of one and all. She herself had been reconciled with God just after the *coup d'état*. It seemed to her that Abbé Faujas might now risk a return to the green *salon*; but he made excuses, mentioning the work he had to do, and his love of retirement. She guessed that he was saving up for a triumphant return next winter. Moreover his success was growing. During his first months his only penitents at confession had been the women from the vegetable market held behind the cathedral, and he used to listen patiently to the dialect of these salad sellers without always understanding what they were saying; whereas now, especially since talk began about the Hospice of the Virgin, on Tuesdays and Fridays he used to see quite a ring of comfortable ladies in silk on their knees around his confessional. When Marthe ingenuously revealed that he had declined to have her, Madame de Condamin had a sudden urge; she left her father confessor, the first curate at St. Saturnin, who was in despair about this desertion, and passed ostentatiously over to Abbé Faujas. Such lustre definitely lifted the priest into polite circles in Plassans.

When Mouret heard that his wife was going to confession, he merely said to her: "Do you think you're doing something wrong now, that you feel the need to tell your affairs to a cassock?"

Moreover, in the midst of all this pious agitation, he seemed to be shutting himself away more, locking himself in with his habits in his narrow way of life. His wife had reproached him for making complaints to Félicité.

"You are right; it was wrong of me," he replied. "One ought not to make pleasure for others by telling one's own troubles. I promise you I won't give your mother such a gift a second time. I've thought better of it. Even if the house falls about my ears, damme if I go and snivel to anyone!"

And from that time, indeed, he showed husbandly respect,

quarrelled with his wife before no one, calling himself as in the past the happiest of men. This move in the direction of good sense cost him little, he was always sizing up his own comfort. In fact he over-played his part as the methodical old merchant, well satisfied with life. Marthe only got the edge of his tongue during his liveliest outbursts. For weeks on end he would respect her, though deluging his children and Rose with mockery, bawling at them from morning to night for the smallest sin. If he hurt her, it was by acts of spitefulness which had meaning for her alone.

Careful with money hitherto, he now turned mean.

"There's no sense in spending money the way we do," he grumbled. "I bet you're giving away everything to those little trollops of yours. It's quite enough to be wasting your time on—. Listen, wife, I'll hand you a hundred francs a month for food. If you really must give alms to girls who don't deserve them, you can find the money out of your dress allowance."

And he held firm on this point: next month, he refused to let Marthe have a pair of new boots, pretending that this would upset his accounts and that he had given her warning. And yet, one evening, Marthe found him crying bitterly in their bedroom. Her kindheartedness awoke at once; she took him in her arms, begged him to tell her what was grieving him. But he broke away from her roughly, said that he wasn't crying, that he had a headache, and that was why his eyes were red.

"Do you think I'm a fool like you with your sobbing?" he shouted.

She was offended. Next day, he pretended to be very cheerful. Then a few days after that, when Abbé Faujas and his mother came downstairs, he said he wasn't going to play his game of picquet. He hadn't a head for cards, he said. On the following days, he invented other excuses, with the result that games stopped altogether. So they used to go out on to the terrace, and Mouret sat opposite his wife and the priest, talking, watching for an innings in the conversation, which he played out as long as possible. Meanwhile Madame Faujas would be sitting a few feet away in the shadow, silent and motionless, with her hands on her lap, like one of those legendary figures keeping guard over treasure with the plaguy vigilance of a crouching dog.

"What a fine evening, eh?" said Mouret, regularly each night. "It's better out here than in the dining-room. You were right to come out for a breath of air. Hallo! a shooting star! Did you see,

en l'abbé? I've heard say that's St. Peter lighting his pipe
let."

And he would laugh. Marthe remained serious, disliking these jokes that did not harmonize with the broad stretch of sky that she could see before her, between Monsieur Rastoil's pear-trees and the chestnut trees of Government House. And sometimes he would pretend not to know that she was going to church now; he used to tackle the priest and tell him that he counted on him for the salvation of the whole house. At other times he would hardly begin a sentence without adding in a cheery tone: "Now that my wife is going to confession——." Then, when he tired of this eternal theme, he used to listen to the things being said in the adjoining gardens; he would recognize the voices rising lightly, borne on the still night air, while the last sounds from Plassans were dying away in the distance.

"Ah," he used to say, cocking his ear towards Government House and lowering his voice, "I can hear Monsieur de Condamin and Dr. Porquier talking. They must be joking about the Paloques. Did you hear the falsetto voice of Monsieur Delangre saying: 'Ladies, you ought to go in, the air's turning cool.' Don't you think he always talks as though he'd swallowed a squeaker, little Delangre?"

And then he would look the other way, towards the Rastoils' garden. "There's no one in their garden," he would add; "I can't hear anything. Ah yes, though, there are those two tall turkey-like daughters of his, standing by the cascade. You'd think the elder one was chewing pebbles when she talks. Every evening, they spend a good hour there, gobbling away. If they're telling each other about the declarations they get, well, that shouldn't take long. Eh, but they're all there! There's Abbé Surin with his fluty voice, and Abbé Fenil—he'd make an excellent rattle for Good Fridays. Sometimes in that garden you'll see a crowd of twenty, and not a finger lifting among the lot. I believe they sit there to listen to what we're saying."

To all this chatter, Abbé Faujas and Marthe would answer with brief words, if questioned directly. But more often both of them would be looking up, their eyes on the distance: they were together in another world, farther off, higher up. One evening Mouret fell asleep. So then, gradually, they began talking together; their voices were hushed, their heads came closer. And a few feet away there was Madame Faujas, with her hands in her lap, her ears well open, eyes unclosed, hearing nothing, seeing nothing; she seemed to be shepherding.

CHAPTER TEN

SUMMER went by. Abbé Faujas seemed in no hurry to make capital out of his growing popularity. He went on with his retired life in Mouret's house, enjoying the quiet of the garden and using it now even in the daytime. He read his breviary in the tunnelled arbour at the far end, slowly walking with head bent the full length of the wall. Sometimes he would close his book and walk more slowly still, as if he was deep in some meditation. And Mouret, who used to spy on him, began smouldering with impatience as he saw this dark form passing to and fro for hours behind his fruit trees.

"I can't call the place my own," he muttered. "I can't look up now without seeing that cassock. He's like a raven, that fellow; he's got a round eye that seems to be watching and waiting for something. I don't trust that fine unconcerned air of his."

It was not till the first days of September that the Hospice of the Virgin was ready. Building work drags on in the provinces. It must be admitted that on two occasions the lady patrons of the committee had completely upset Monsieur Licutaud's plans with ideas of their own. When the committee took over the establishment, they rewarded the architect for his willing help with the kindest of thanks. Everything they thought was highly suitable: spacious rooms, excellent exits, a courtyard planted with trees and embellished with two little fountains. Madame de Condamin was especially delighted with the treatment of the front, which indeed was one of her own ideas. Over the door, on a plaque of black marble, the words *Hospice of the Virgin* were engraved in letters of gold.

The opening ceremony was quite a moving occasion. The bishop came in person with the chapter, to install the Sisters of St. Joseph who were authorized to minister to the establishment. Some fifty girls of eight to fifteen, collected from the streets in the old town, had been brought together. All that the parents had to do to gain

pour l'abbé? I've heard say that's St. Peter lighting his pipe under."

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Rastoil, it wouldn't be difficult to make them blush to the whites of their eyes. Did they set so much as a foot outside their drawing-rooms? Did they take half the trouble I've taken? Then there's Madame Mouret, who pretended to be at the helm, and really was only tailing after her dear Abbé Faujas. There's another hypocrite for you, and we shall see some queer things there yet. Well, all of them, every one, had a kind word; and I? Nothing. I'm the little dog. Things can't go on like this, you know, Paloque. The little dog will bite."

From this day forward, Madame Paloque proved much less obliging. She was very behindhand with the accounts, refused any work she disliked, until at last the lady patrons talked of finding a clerk. Marthe explained these difficulties to Abbé Faujas, and asked if he had a likely person to recommend.

"Don't look for anyone," he answered. "I may have somebody. Give me two or three days."

For some time since, he had been receiving letters frequently, all bearing the Besançon postmark, and all were addressed in the same hand, in heavy ugly writing. Rose used to take them upstairs and maintained that the mere sight of the envelopes caused the priest annoyance.

"His face goes anyways," she said. "He certainly doesn't like this person who's writing so often."

Mouret's old curiosity was temporarily revived by this correspondence. So one day he took one of these letters up himself with an amiable smile of excuse, saying that Rose wasn't there. The priest was on his guard no doubt, for he pretended to be delighted, as if he had been eagerly awaiting the letter. But Mouret wasn't to be taken in like that. He stayed outside on the landing and put his ear to the key-hole.

"Another one from your sister, eh?" Madame Faujas was saying. "What's making her pester you like this?"

There was silence, then the sound of paper being violently crumpled; the priest's voice began grumbling:

"Why, it's the same old story. She wants to come and join us here and bring her husband for us to find him work. She thinks we're rolling in money. I'm afraid they might have an urge and turn up here one fine morning."

"No, no, we can't do with them, do you hear, Ovid?" the mother's voice replied. "They never liked you, they've always been jealous of you. Trouche is a bad lot, and Olympe has no heart. You'd soon see;

Abbé Fenil's admission was simply to declare that their work compelled them to be away from home throughout the day. Monsieur Delangre made a speech which was loudly applauded. At great length, and in the grand manner, he explained what this new type of crèche was intended to be; he described it as "a school for clean living and for work, where interesting young persons would escape evil temptations." No one failed to hear a tactful allusion towards the end of the speech to the real author of the scheme, Abbé Faujas. And he was there, with the other priests. His grave handsome face remained unmoved when all eyes turned in his direction, but Marthe, sitting on the platform among the other lady patrons, was blushing.

When the ceremony was over, the bishop expressed a wish to go over the house and see everything down to the smallest details. And in spite of the obvious annoyance of Abbé Fenil, he summoned Abbé Faujas, whose dark eyes had been fixed upon him throughout the ceremony, and asked if he would kindly accompany him, adding in an audible voice, with a smile, that he certainly could not choose a better informed guide. This remark passed round among the public gathering which was now breaking up, and that evening the whole of Plassans was talking about his lordship's favourable attitude.

The committee of lady patrons had set a room apart in the house, where they offered a light refreshment to the bishop; he accepted a biscuit and a finger or so of malaga, and found an opportunity to say a kind word to each one in turn. This made a happy ending to this pious celebration, for regrettably, both before and during the ceremony, there had been ruffled tempers among the ladies, and the tactful praise of Bishop Rousselot restored good humour. When they were left to themselves they declared that it had all gone off very well; they could not say too much about the bishop's graciousness. Only Madame Paloque was left white-faced. The bishop had forgotten her, when handing out his compliments.

"How right you were!" she furiously remarked to her husband on getting home. "A nice idea, herding all these tainted girls together. Fancy, after giving them all my time, and then that great boob of a bishop, who trembles before all his clergy, couldn't even find one word of thanks for me! As if Madame de Condamin had done anything! She's far too busy showing off her gowns, that retired. . . . We know a thing or two about that, don't we? I'm afraid we shall have to trot out some stories that won't be to everybody's liking. We have nothing to hide, but as for Madame Delangre and Madame

the two rooms. My husband was only thinking of your personal convenience, but if it's your wish, we're not going to stand in your way; you can arrange the flat to suit yourselves."

When Mouret was alone with his wife, he flew into a temper.

"Really, I can't understand you. When I let the rooms to the priest you were sulky about it; you didn't want so much as a cat in your house. And now, if the priest brought in his family complete, the whole crew down to grand nephews and nieces, you'd only say thank you. I was doing my best to pull your dress; didn't you notice? It was plain enough that I didn't want these people. They're not desirable."

"How can you know?" cried Marthe, annoyed by such unfairness. "Who said so?"

"Why, Abbé Faujas himself. Er, yes, I overheard him one day, talking to his mother."

She looked at him steadily. So then he blushed a little, and began halting in his words:

"Anyway, I know, and that's enough. The sister's heartless, and the husband a bad lot. It's no good looking high and mighty about it; those are their own words, I've invented nothing. You can understand that I don't want this gang in my house. The old mother was the very first to say she wouldn't hear of her daughter coming. And now here's the priest saying the opposite. I don't know what's made him change. Some new hole and corner business of his. He must need them for something."

Marthe shrugged her shoulders and let him go on shouting. He ordered Rose not to clean the rooms but Rose was only taking orders from her mistress. For five whole days his anger was spent in bitter words, in furious recriminations. When Abbé Faujas was there, he merely sulked, he didn't dare attack him to his face. Then, as always, he found another way round. He resorted to mockery against these people who were coming. And he drew the purse-strings still tighter, shut himself in still more, buried himself in his own little private world. When the Trouche couple arrived one evening in October, all that he did was to mutter:

"Phew, I don't like the look of them, they've got nasty faces."

And indeed Abbé Faujas didn't seem at all anxious to display his sister and brother-in-law on the day of their arrival. His mother had taken up her position on the door-step, and as soon as she saw them coming out of Government Square, she kept on the alert, casting uneasy glances behind her down the passage and into the kitchen.

she was out of luck. As the Trouches walked in, Marthe, who had to go out, was stepping up on to the terrace, followed by the children.

"Ah, here's the whole family," she said with a pleasant smile.

Madame Faujas, completely self-possessed though she usually was, became slightly confused and hardly muttered a word in reply. So for a few minutes, there was a general stand-still, face to face, in the middle of the hall, while they looked at each other. Mouret had nimbly come up the terrace steps; Rose was standing stock-still at her kitchen door.

"You must be very pleased?" Marthe went on, speaking to Madame Faujas.

Then, realizing the embarrassment that kept the whole company dumb, and wishing to be nice to the new-comers, she turned to Trouche and said:

"You arrived by the five o'clock train, didn't you? And how long does the journey take from Besançon?"

"Seventeen hours by rail," answered Trouche, showing a mouth devoid of teeth. "And third class, I can tell you it's grim. Your stomach gets a proper shaking."

He began to laugh, with a peculiar clicking of the jaws. Madame Faujas looked daggers at him. So then, automatically, he tried to restore a button which had gone from his greasy overcoat, and swung to the front of his legs—to hide spots, no doubt—two hat boxes which he was carrying, one yellow, one green. His neck was reddish; his adam's apple kept moving up and down under a crumpled slip of black neck-tie which just disclosed the top of a dirty shirt. His face, heavily seamed, eloquent of vice, was lit by two little dark eyes, restlessly roving all the time over people, over things, with a greedy frightened look; thief's eyes examining the house where their owner would return in the dark, to do a job.

Mouret thought Trouche was looking at the locks.

"That fellow's got the sort of eyes that take impressions," he thought.

Meanwhile Olympe realized that her husband hadn't begun too well. She was a tall slip of a woman, fair-haired, faded, with a flat unpleasing face. She was carrying a small deal box and a large bundle done up in cloth.

"We had pillows with us," she said, glancing informatively at her bundle. "It's not too bad third class with pillows. You're just as comfortable as if you travel first. And say, what a lot you save! You

may have money, but there's no point in throwing it out of the window, is there, madame?"

"Certainly," answered Marthe, who was rather surprised by the newcomers.

Olympe stepped forward under the full light, and entered into conversation with an ingratiating tone.

"It's the same with clothes. I always put on my worst when I travel. I said to Honoré: 'Come, your old coat's quite good enough.' And he's wearing his working trousers too; he's nearly done with them. And see, I'm wearing my shabbiest dress; it's even in holes, I think. This shawl's from my mother; I used it for ironing on, at home. And just look at my bonnet! An old bonnet I only used for going to the wash-place. And even all that's too good for the railway, isn't it, madame?"

"Certainly, certainly," repeated Marthe, trying to smile.

But at this moment, an impatient voice was heard at the head of the stairs, sharp and short:

"Coming, mother?"

Mouret looked up and saw Abbé Faujas leaning over the banisters on the second floor, with a glowering face—leaning far over, risking a fall, to see what was going on in the hall. He had heard voices talking below and must have been there a little time, growing more and more impatient.

"Coming, mother?" he roared again.

"Yes, yes, we're coming up," answered Madame Faujas, who seemed to quiver at the furious sound of her son's voice.

She turned to the couple and said:

"Come, children, upstairs. We musn't keep Madame Mouret."

But the Trouches did not seem to hear. They were quite at home in the hall; they were looking about them in delight, as if the house had been made over to them as a present.

"It's very nice, very nice, isn't it, Honoré? Our letters from Ovid didn't make it sound as nice as this. What did I say? 'Honoré', I said, 'we must go; we shall be better off there, and I shall be better.' And you see, I was right."

"Yes, yes," said Honoré, mumbling, "it must be very comfortable. And the garden's pretty large, I think."

Then he turned to Mouret and asked:

"Do you allow your tenants to stroll in the garden, monsieur?" But Mouret had no time to reply. Abbé Faujas, who had come lower down, roared in a voice of thunder:

"Now then, Trouche! Now then, Olympe!"

They turned round. And when they saw him standing on the stairs in a towering rage, they made themselves small, they stooped their backs and followed. He led the way, without adding another word, without appearing to notice even that the Mourets were there, staring at this curious procession. Madame Faujas, to ease matters, gave Marthe a smile as she brought up the rear. But when Marthe had gone out, and Mouret was left to himself, he stayed a moment in the hall. Upstairs on the second floor, doors were slamming furiously. There was one loud outburst of voices and then deathly silence.

"Has he put them in the dungeon?" Mouret said with a chuckle. "Anyway, it's a nasty family."

The next morning, Trouche, decently dressed all in black, clean shaved, his scanty hair carefully brushed to the front, was introduced by Abbé Faujas to Marthe and the ladies of the committee. He was forty-five, had very good hand-writing, said that he had run the accountancy for a long time in a business firm. The ladies took him on at once. He was to represent the committee, see to practical details, from ten to four, in an office up on the first floor of the hospice. His salary was fifteen hundred francs a month.

"You see, they're very quiet, these good people," said Marthe to her husband, after a few days.

And indeed the Trouches made no more noise than the Faujas. Two or three times Rose felt sure that she had heard the mother and daughter squabbling; but then at once the grave voice of the priest was raised, restoring peace. Trouche set off regularly at a quarter to ten each morning and came back at a quarter past four. Olympe went out shopping sometimes with Madame Faujas. No one had so far seen her come downstairs alone.

The window of the Trouches' bedroom looked out over the garden; it was the last one on the right, facing the trees of Government House. Long red calico curtains, trimmed with yellow, hung behind the glass, making a splash of colour in contrast with the white curtains belonging to the priest. Also the window was always kept shut. One evening when Abbé Faujas was sitting on the terrace with his mother together with Mouret, a little involuntary cough was heard. The priest quickly glanced up, looked annoyed, and saw the shadows of Olympe and her husband, leaning out of their window, keeping quite still. Faujas kept on looking up for a moment or two,

breaking off his conversation with Marthe. The couple upstairs put their heads in. The faint squeak of the window-catch was heard.

"Mother," said the priest, "you ought to go up. I'm afraid you might catch a chill."

Madame Faujas said good evening to everyone and went. When she was gone, Marthe resumed the conversation, asking in an obliging voice:

"Is your sister not so well? I haven't seen her for a week."

"She needs a good rest," the priest answered curtly.

But Marthe pressed her point, out of kindheartedness.

"She lives very shut in; the air would do her good. These October evenings are still quite warm. Why doesn't she ever come down to the garden? She hasn't been down there once. Yet you know that the garden is entirely at your disposal."

The priest declined, half mumbling a few words; then Moutet, to embarrass him further, became even more amiable than his wife.

"Just what I was saying this morning! Your sister, *monieur l'abbé*, might well come down and do some sewing in the sunlight, of an afternoon, instead of living shut in, upstairs. One would think she didn't dare show her face at the window. Do we scare her, by any chance? We're surely not so alarming as all that. It's the same with Monsieur Trouche; he bolts up the stairs. So tell them to come down now and then, and spend an evening with us. They must get mortally bored, all alone in their room."

lapped and lulled there. Abbé Faujas still refrained from talking of God; he remained just a friend to her, charmed her only by his grave manner, by the faint suggestion of incense conveyed in his cassock. Two or three times when alone with him, she had again burst into nervous fits of sobbing, without knowing why, yet feeling happy to be crying so. And each time he had done no more than take her hands in silence, soothing her with his strong calm gaze. When she wanted to talk to him of her moods of sadness that came without cause, of her secret joys, of her need to be guided, he hushed her words with a smile; he said that these things were no concern of his, that she must speak of them with Abbé Bourrette. So then she bore the burden of it all herself, and was left quivering. And he, assuming greater stature, passed beyond her reach like a god, to whose feet she then came, bending the knees of her soul.

Marthe's main occupations now were the masses and religious devotions that she attended. She was happy in the great nave of St. Saturnin; there she tasted to the full the purely physical restfulness that she sought. When she was there, all else was forgotten. It was as though a great window had opened on another life, a life so infinitely broad and deep, so full of emotion that it filled her and sufficed. But she still had her dread of the cathedral; she came to it with a shrinking feeling, a nervous bashfulness that made her glance behind her when she was pushing the door open, to see whether anyone was watching her walk in. But then, once inside, she gave way; all was tender to her, even the well-fed voice of Abbé Bourrette, who, after absolution, kept her kneeling a few minutes longer, talking to her about Madame Rastoil's dinners or the last evening in the green salon.

Marthe often returned home quite overcome. Religion broke her utterly. Meanwhile Rose had become all-powerful in the house. She was sharp with Mouret, scolded him because he soiled too much linen, made him eat when supper was ready. She even undertook his salvation.

"The mistress is quite right to lead a Christian life," she said to him. "But you will be damned, you will, monsieur, and quite rightly too, because at heart you're not good; no, you're not good! You ought to take her to mass next Sunday."

Mouret gave a shrug. He let things go as they would, did housework himself, gave the dining-room a sweep when the floor seemed too dusty. But the children were more of a worry. During the holidays their mother was hardly ever there. Désirée and Octave

(he had failed in his matriculation once again) turned upside-down; Serge, who was unwell, kept to his bed several days reading in his room. He had become the favourite of the Faujas, who lent him books. Mouret had now ventured upon trying to handle the youngsters: Octave especially drove him wild. Before term began he decided against another year in school. "A fine boy; he would find him a post with a business firm in Marseille."

"As you don't care to keep an eye on them," he said to Marthe, "I really must find them somewhere else to go. I can't stand them longer. I'd rather turn them out of the house. If that upsets you well, it can't be helped. In the first place, Octave's impossible. He'll never matriculate. Far better train him at once to earn his living than let him roam the streets with a bunch of rowdies. He's shown out and about in the town."

Marthe was quite upset; when she heard that she was going to lose one of her children, she seemed to wake out of a sleep. For a week, she managed to get Octave's departure postponed. She ran more to the house, resumed her previous life of anxiety. And then she wilted again; and when one day Octave gave her a hug and told her he was leaving that evening for Marseille, she had no power to resist, she was content with giving him good advice.

Mouret, when he came back from the station, felt heavy in heart. He looked for his wife, found her in the garden under an ancient crying. And there Mouret unburdened himself.

"So that's one the less!" he shouted. "What a pleasure it must be for you. You can traipse round the churches now just as you like. Don't you worry; the other two won't be staying long. For example, Serge because he's a gentle lad, and I think he's a bit young to go off to study law; but if he's in the way, I'll take him off your hands as well. As for Désirée, she shall go to her nurse."

Marthe continued weeping silently.

"What do you expect? One can't be outdoors and in. They've chosen to be out, your children don't count any longer for any reason. Besides we must make room, eh, for all the people in my house. The house isn't big enough now. Lucky we shall be if we are not turned out ourselves."

He paused and looked up; he was examining the windows on the second floor.

"Now don't cry yourself silly. You're being watched. You can see those two eyes looking through the chink in the red curtain. They know them well; they're the eyes of that sister of the priest."

ure to see them up there, any time of the day. It may be that the priest is a decent man, but those Trouche people—why, I feel them crouching behind their curtains like wolves on the watch. I bet that if the priest wasn't there to stop them, they'd be out of that window in the dark to steal my pears. Wipe your eyes, good wife; you may be sure that our quarrels are a feast for them. I don't see why, just because they have caused our son to leave, we should show them how grieved we are about it, you and I."

His voice was quavering, he wasn't far from sobbing himself. Marthe, overwhelmed, touched to the heart by his last words, was just about to throw herself into his arms. But they were afraid they might be seen, they felt there was a barrier between them. So then they parted; and Olympe's eyes were still shining at the chink between the red curtains.

in a quarter of an hour both set off. The old priest mopped his brow and swayed about the path, muttering broken sentences.

"He would have died like a dog, without one prayer, if his sister hadn't come to warn me last night, about eleven. How glad I am she did, the dear thing. He didn't want to compromise a single one of us, he might have passed away without the last sacraments even. Yes, good friend, there he lay dying, shut away by himself, alone, deserted, such a fine intelligence too, and he only lived to do good."

He paused; then after a little he went on, speaking in a changed voice:

"Do you think Fenil will pardon me for this? Never, surely. When Compan saw me coming with the holy oil, he said no, he called to me to go away. Well, it's done! I shall never be rector. I would rather it was that way. At least I did not let Compan die like a dog. He had been at war with Fenil for thirty years. When he took to his bed he told me so: 'Well,' he said, 'Fenil wins; now that I'm down, he'll strike.' Ah, poor Compan! So proud, so strong I saw him in the old days at St. Saturnin——. Little Eusebius, the choir-boy I took with me to give the *viaticum*, was quite flustered when he saw where we were going every time he rang his bell he looked behind him, as though he was afraid Abbé Fenil might hear him."

Abbé Faujas, striding along with head down, was looking thoughtful and still said nothing; he seemed not to be listening to his companion.

"Has his lordship been warned?" he suddenly asked.

But Abbé Bourrette in his turn seemed thoughtful. He did not reply. Then, as they reached Abbé Compan's door, he whispered:

"Tell him that we have just met Fenil and that he greeted us. That will give him pleasure. He'll think that I'm rector."

They walked upstairs silently. The sister of the dying man opened the door. At the sight of the two priests, she burst into sobs, and stammered out through her tears:

"It's all over. He's just passed away in my arms. I was alone. As he was dying he looked around him and murmured: 'I must have the plague, they've pardoned me.' Ah, messieurs, he died with his eyes full of tears."

They passed into the little bedroom where Abbé Compan lay. With his head on a pillow he seemed to be sleeping. His eyes were still open, and his white face, ever so sad, was still tearful; the tears were running down his cheeks. Abbé Bourrette dropped to his knees, sobbing and praying, with his head on the blankets trailing

down. Abbé Faujas remained standing, looking at the poor man dead; then, after kneeling for a moment, he left the room discreetly. Abbé Bourrette, deep in his grief, did not even hear him close the door.

Abbé Faujas went straight to the bishop's palace. In his lordship's ante-chamber he met Abbé Surin carrying a load of papers.

"Did you want to see his lordship?" asked the secretary with his eternal smile. "If so, you've come on a bad day. His lordship is so busy that he has closed his door on all and sundry."

"It's about a very urgent matter," said Abbé Faujas calmly. "At any rate he can be told that I am here. I will wait, if necessary!"

"I'm afraid you'll be wasting your time. His lordship has several people with him. Come back tomorrow; that would be better."

But just as the priest was taking a chair, the bishop opened the door of his study. He appeared very annoyed to see his visitor, and feigned at first not to recognise him.

"My child," he said to Surin, "when you have filed those papers, come back at once; I have a letter to dictate to you."

Then turning to the priest who was respectfully standing, he said:

"Ah, it's you, Monsieur Faujas. I am very pleased to see you. Come in, come in to my study. No, you never disturb me."

Bishop Rousselot's study was a large, rather dark room where a great wood fire continually burned, winter and summer alike. Carpet and curtains were very thick and deadened the air; one seemed to be stepping into lukewarm water. Here the bishop lived in an armchair, as snug as a dowager lady in retirement, hating noise, and unloading the cares of the diocese on Abbé Fenil. His great love was classical literature. It was said that he was secretly translating Horace; little lines from the Greek Anthology were also his delight, and he would let out improper quotations; these he enjoyed with all the candour of the literary man unaffected by vulgar prudery.

"You see, there's no one with me," he said, as he settled down by the fire; "but I'm a little out of sorts, so I put a guard on my door. You may talk, I am at your disposal."

Underlying his usual politeness there was a vague uneasiness, a resigned acceptance. When Abbé Faujas told him of the death of the rector, he rose to his feet, alarmed and annoyed.

"What!" he cried. "My worthy Companion gone, and I not allowed to say farewell! No one warned me. Ah, indeed, friend, you were

When you hinted that I was no longer master here; advantage taken of my kindness."

"Your lordship knows how devoted I am to you," said Abbé Faujas. "A sign is all I ask."

The bishop nodded his head, saying thoughtfully:

"Yes, yes, I have not forgotten your offer—yours is an excellent heart. But, but, if I broke with Fenil, what an uproar there would be! I should be deafened for a week. Yet if I was sure that you would rid me at a stroke of this personage, if I wasn't afraid that before a week was out he would be back to set his foot on your throat——"

Abbé Faujas was unable to conceal a smile. Tears came in the bishop's eyes.

"I am afraid, that's the truth," he went on, as he relapsed into his armchair; "it's as bad as that. It's this wretch who has been the death of Compan and concealed his last hour from me, so that I should not go and close his eyes; what dreadful things he thinks of. But, you know, I would rather enjoy a life of peace. Fenil is very active, he's most helpful with the diocese. When I am no longer here, things will perhaps be better thought out."

He was easier now; his smile was coming back.

"Besides, all's going well at the moment, I see no difficulties. We can wait."

Abbé Faujas sat down, and said calmly:

"Of course. But it will be necessary for you to appoint a rector at St. Saturnin, in place of Abbé Compan."

Bishop Rousset put his hands to his brow, looking desperate.

"Goodness, you're right!" he stammered. "I was forgetting that. Honest Compan doesn't know what trouble he's giving me by dying so suddenly without my being warned. I promised you the post, didn't I?"

The priest bowed his head.

"Well, friend, now you must save me, you must let me take back my promise. You know how Fenil detests you; the success of the Hospice of the Virgin has made him quite furious. He swears that he won't let you conquer Plassans. You see that I'm talking quite openly with you. Now, during the last few days, as there was talk of the rectorship at St. Saturnin, I mentioned your name. Fenil flew into the most frightful temper, and I had to swear that I would give the post to one of his men, Abbé Chardon, whom you know, and a most worthy person besides. No, my friend, do this for me; give up this idea. I will give you any compensation you ask."

The priest remained grave. After pausing as though to commune with himself, he said:

"You are aware, my lord, that I have no personal ambitions: my wish is to live in retirement, and it would be a real pleasure to give up this post. Only I am not my own master, I am anxious to satisfy the protectors who take an interest in me. For your own sake, my lord, think before you make a decision which you might regret later on."

Although Abbé Faujas had spoken very humbly, the bishop felt the hidden threat in these words. He rose, took a few steps, a victim of the most painful perplexity. Then, throwing up his hands, he said:

"Oh well, it will mean a long spell of worry—I should have preferred to avoid this explanation, but since you insist, I must speak out frankly. It's this way, my dear abbé: Abbé Fenil charges you with many things. As I think I told you, he must have written to Besançon, where apparently he learned the regrettable stories familiar to you. Of course you did explain them all away for me, and I know your merits, your life of repentance and retirement, but there it is! The vicar-general has weapons against you, and makes formidable use of them. Often I hardly know how to defend you. And when the minister asked me to accept you in my diocese, I did not conceal that your position here would be difficult. Then he became more pressing, he told me that was your affair, and ~~first~~ I gave way. Only you must not come today and ask me for too much."

Abbé Faujas had not bent his head; he raised it even, looked the bishop in the face, saying briefly:

"You gave me your word, my lord."

"Certainly, certainly. Poor Compan was sinking lower every day, you came and disclosed certain things to me; so then I promised I don't deny it.—Listen, I'll tell you everything, so that you can't accuse me of veering like a weathercock. You claimed that the minister was very anxious that you should have the rectory at St. Saturnin. Well, I wrote, I informed myself, one of my friends went to the ministry. They almost laughed in his face, they told him that they didn't even know of you. The minister completely denies that he is your protector, do you hear? If you like, I'll read you a letter in which he speaks of you quite harshly."

And with that he reached a hand out to a ~~chair~~ but Abbé Faujas had risen to his feet, still keeping his eyes on the bishop, and there was something a little ironical and ~~proving in his smile~~

"Ah, my lord, my lord!" he murmured

And, as if he did not care to explain things further, he added after a pause:

"You can take back your promise, my lord. Believe me, in all this I was thinking more of you than myself. Later on, when it will be too late, you will remember my warning."

Already he was making for the door; but the bishop detained him, brought him back and asked uneasily, speaking low:

"Come now, what do you mean? Explain yourself, dear Monsicur Faujas. I know very well that they're not pleased with me in Paris, ever since the Marquis of Lagrifoul was elected. Little do they know me if they think I had a hand in that; why, I hardly move out of my study twice a month. So you think they accuse me of getting the marquis in?"

"Yes, I fear so," said the priest bluntly.

"Why, it's absurd, I've never meddled with politics, I live among my beloved books. Fenil did it all. I told him twenty times that he would end by making things difficult for me in Paris."

He stopped and blushed slightly, regretting that his last words had slipped out. Abbé Faujas sat down opposite him once more, and spoke in a deep sonorous voice:

"My lord, you have just condemned your vicar-general, and I said no more than that to you. Do not continue to link forces with him, or he will create serious difficulties for you. Think what you may, I have friends in Paris. I know that the Marquis of Lagrifoul's election has turned the government very much against you. Rightly or wrongly, you are thought to be solely responsible for the opposition movement so apparent here in Plassans, where the minister for special reasons is extremely anxious to win a majority. If the royalist candidate won again at the next elections, it would be most annoying, and I should have fears for your peace of mind."

"But this is outrageous!" cried the unfortunate bishop, fidgetting in his armchair. "As if I could stop the royalist candidate getting in! Have I got the smallest influence? Have I ever had a hand in all this? Why, there are days when I feel like going and shutting myself up in a convent. I should take my library with me and lead a nice quiet life. Fenil ought to be bishop instead of me. If I listened to Fenil, I should be putting myself right across the government, I would only listen to Rome, and send Paris about its business. But that doesn't suit my mood at all, I want to die in peace.—So you say the minister is furious with me?"

The priest did not answer, but the two creases which appeared at

the corners of his mouth gave his face an expression of silent scorn.

"Why, if I thought I was making myself agreeable to him by appointing you rector of St. Saturnin," the bishop continued, "I would try to arrange it. But, but I assure you, you are mistaken: you are not in the odour of sanctity."

Abbé Faujas made an abrupt gesture. In a moment of sudden impatience he showed his hand:

"Ah! are you forgetting that vile stories about me are going round, that I arrived in Plassans with a cassock in holes? When a lost man is sent to his post of danger, he is disowned until his hour of triumph. Help me to success, my lord, and you'll see that I have friends

ship had shuddered ever so slightly; but then he made a point of firmness that was almost amusing. He gave Abbé Faujas a look.

"Here, go this way," he said, opening a door hidden under a long curtain.

He stopped Faujas on the threshold, went on looking at him and laughing:

"Fenil will be furious. You promise to defend me against him if he bawls too loud? He's your responsibility, I warn you. I also expect you to see that the Marquis of Lagrifoul is not re-elected. Yes, I shall be leaning on you now, dear Monsieur Faujas."

He waved a goodbye with his white hand, then went back to the warmth of his study. The priest stood where he was, his back still bowed; he was surprised by the feminine ease with which his lordship changed masters and yielded to the stronger. Only he felt that the prelate had just been amusing himself with him, just as he must be secretly amused with Abbé Fenil, as he sat in that snug armchair of his where he translated Horace.

Next Thursday, towards ten in the evening, when all the fine company in Plassans were thronging the *salon* in green, Abbé Faujas appeared at the threshold. He looked splendid, tall, rosy-faced, dressed in a fine cassock that shone like satin. He still wore his grave but with a slight smile—oh, only the merest curve of his lips, what was needed to give a friendly glow to his austere face.

"Ah, here's the dear rector!" gaily exclaimed Madame de Condamin.

But the mistress of the house was hastening towards him. Taking one of the priest's hands in both her own, she led him to the centre of the drawing-room, gently moving her head from side to side, caressing him with her eyes.

"What a surprise, what a delightful surprise!" she kept saying. "We haven't seen you for ages. Must we then wait till good fortune comes your way, before you remember your friends?"

The priest was bowing right and left with easy assurance. And round him, what a flattering ovation, what a whispering of enchanted ladies! Madame Delangre and Madame Rastoil did not wait for him to come and greet them; they came forward to congratulate him on his appointment, which was official since that morning. The mayor, the police magistrate, even Monsieur de Bourdeu gave him the heartiest handshakes.

"What a fellow, eh?" Monsieur de Condamin was whispering in

rate, Abbé Faujas had the upper hand. And so the fair fashioners gently basked in the rays of the rising sun.

About half-way through the evening Abbé Bourrette walked in. The talk died down, curious eyes were turned upon him. Everyone knew that only the day before he was still counting on the rectorship at St. Saturnin. He had acted as locum for Abbé Compan during his long illness; the place was his. He remained standing a moment on the threshold without noticing the stir his arrival had caused, a little short of breath and blinking his eyes. Then, catching sight of Abbé Faujas, he hurried to him, shook him by both hands effusively, and exclaimed:

"Ah, my dear friend! let me congratulate you. I've just come from your house where I learned from your mother that you were here. How glad I am to meet with you."

Abbé Faujas had risen to his feet, feeling awkward in spite of his great self-command, quite surprised by these warm words which he certainly was not expecting.

"Yes," he murmured, "I had to accept, in spite of my shortcomings. At first I declined, and mentioned to his lordship other, worthier names, and yours as well."

Abbé Bourrette screwed up his eyes; then taking him aside, spoke in a low voice:

"His lordship told me all about it. Apparently Fenil simply wouldn't hear of me. He would have sent the diocese up in flames, if I had been appointed. Those were his very words. My crime was that I closed poor Compan's eyes.—And he pressed, as you know, for the appointment of Abbé Chardon, a pious man no doubt, but notoriously inadequate. The vicar-general's idea was to use his name and rule himself. It was then that his lordship gave you the appointment to dodge and counter him. That gives me my revenge. I am delighted, my dear friend. Did *you* know the story?"

"No, not in detail."

"Well that's how it all happened, I can assure you. I got the facts from the lips of the bishop himself. Between ourselves, he did hold out something attractive by way of compensation. The second vicar-general, Abbé Vial, has long wanted to go and live in Rome; the post would fall vacant, you understand. However, silence about all this. I'd rather have this than ten pots of gold."

Then he went on shaking Abbé Faujas' hands, while his broad face beamed with pleasure. The ladies standing near by exchanged glances of astonishment and then smiled. But the dear old man's

Marthe was waiting for him by the door. The night was dark. In the street outside the darkness half-blinded them. They crossed Government Square without saying a word. But when they were outside the house in Balande Street, Marthe touched the priest on his arm, just as he was putting the key into the lock.

"I am very happy indeed about your good fortune," she said in a voice full of emotion. "Be kind to me today and grant me the favour you have refused so far. I assure you, Abbé Bourrette doesn't understand me. You alone can guide and save me."

His gesture seemed to brush her aside. Then, when he had opened the door and lit the little lamp which Rose left at the foot of the stairs, he said to her gently, as he began going up:

"You promised me to be reasonable. I will think about what you ask. We'll talk about it."

She could have kissed his hands. She only went into her bedroom when she heard him close his door on the floor above. And while she was undressing and getting into bed she had no ear for Mouret, already half-asleep as he told of the gossip going round the town. He had been to his club, the Club of Commerce, which he rarely visited.

"Yes, Abbé Faujas has been one too many for Abbé Bourrette," he said for the tenth time, as he turned his head on the pillow. "He's not much of a man, Abbé Bourrette. Still, it's good fun to watch the cassocks rending each other. The other day, you remember, when they were kissing and hugging down at the end of the garden, weren't they just like two brothers? Ah yes, they even steal one another's parishioners.—Why don't you answer, good wife? Do you think it isn't true? No, you're dropping off, eh? Well, good-night, till tomorrow."

He fell asleep, still mumbling a little. Marthe, wide-eyed, lay staring up at the ceiling lit by the night light, listening to the shuffle of Abbé Faujas' slippers, as he went to bed.

that her husband and the priest were not good friends. Quite at committees at the hospice, the other ladies asked her questions which tried her patience. For the truth was that she seemed to be very happy just then, very calm; the house in Delande Street had never seemed to enjoy such an even temperature. As Abbé Faujas had let her understand that he would take charge of her conscience when he judged that Abbé Bourrette was no longer adequate, she was living on this hope, with all the girlish joy of a first communicant promised holy pictures if she is good. At times she thought that she was going back to childhood; she had sensations and desires whose freshness, whose youthfulness quite moved her. In the spring one day when Mouret was clipping his tall box hedges, he was surprised to find her under the arbour at the end of the garden, among the young shoots growing in the warm air, with her eyes bathed in tears.

"What's the matter with you, my dear?" he asked in concern.

"Nothing, dear, really," she answered with a smile. "I am happy, so happy."

He shrugged his shoulders, and went on clipping with neat strokes of the shears to bring his hedging into perfect line. It was a great pride for him, each year, if his box-hedges looked the trimmest of all in the neighbourhood. Marthe, who had wiped her eyes, ~~felt a tear~~ coming in her throat and began crying again, great hot tears. He was touched to the heart by the smell of the green freshly-cut fronds. She was forty now, and it was her youth that she was crying for.

Meanwhile, since he had become rector, Abbé Faujas was showing a gentle dignity which seemed to increase his stature. He had a masterly way of carrying his breviary and his hat. At the cathedral he had declared his strength by strokes that secured the respect of the clergy. Abbé Fenil, defeated again in two or three questions of detail, appeared to be leaving the field to his adversary. But the new rector was not so foolish as to triumph by sheer force. He had his own form of pride; it was surprisingly pliant and humble. He felt very clearly that Plassans was as yet far from won. So, if he stopped sometimes in the street to shake hands with Monsieur Delangre, he simply exchanged passing greetings with Monsieur de Bourdeu, Monsieur Maffre and others among Monsieur Rastoil's guests. A whole section of society in the town was still not at all sure about him. He was accused of holding very queer political opinions. It was time he came out into the open, declared himself for a party. But no, he smiled, he said that he was of the party of the upright, which

reproaches, shouting that I was to blame and had brought myself badly. I am really in a very trying position. I should have wished that I was better known than that; I have sixty years of usefulness to my credit."

And he went on wailing, spoke of the sacrifices he had made for his son, talked of his practice, which he was afraid of losing.

Abbé Faujas stood in the middle of the garden walk with his head up, listening gravely.

"I should be only too glad to be of help," he said obligingly. "I'll see Monsieur Maffre and tell him that his justifiable indignation has carried him too far; I'll even ask him to let me see him tomorrow. He's over there, next door."

He walked across the garden, bent over towards Monsieur Maffre, who indeed was always there, keeping company with Madame Rastoil. But when the police magistrate heard that the rector wanted to have a talk with him, he said that he wouldn't like him to be inconvenienced; he was at his disposal and would be honoured to pay him a visit the next day.

"Ah, rector," added Madame Rastoil, "my congratulations on your sermon last Sunday. All the ladies here were very moved, let me assure you."

He bowed, again walked across the garden, to come and explain to Dr. Porquier. And then, until it was dark he slowly walked the paths, taking no further part in the conversation on either side, listening to the laughter of the two groups, to right and to left.

Next day, when Monsieur Maffre called, Abbé Faujas was superintending the work of two men who were repairing the water basin. He had expressed a desire to see the fountain playing; a basin without water was not cheerful, he said. Mouret was not in favour of this; he maintained that accidents might happen, but Marthe had solved the difficulty by deciding that the basin should have a little wire fence.

"Please, rector," called Rose, "the magistrate has come to see you."

Abbé Faujas hurried in. He was going to take Monsieur Maffre up to the second floor, to his own apartment, but Rose was already opening the door into the drawing-room.

"Please walk in," she said. "Aren't you living here? Why make the magistrate walk up two flights of stairs? Only, if you had warned me this morning, I would have dusted the drawing-room."

As she came out and closed the door, after throwing the shutters open, Mouret called her into the dining-room.

cigarettes, even play a game of billiards or chess. There's no liberty you won't take if you allow them none. Only, you may well understand that I wouldn't send them to every café. What I should like them to have is a special centre, a club, such as I have seen in several towns."

Then he worked out a complete scheme. Monsieur Maffre gradually began to see the idea, nodded his head and said:

"Excellent, excellent. It would be a worthy pendant to the Hospice of the Virgin. Ah, it's a fine plan, rector, and we must see that something is done."

"Well," was the priest's last word as he went with him as far as the street, "since you think the idea is a good one, say a word about it to your friends. I'll see Monsieur Delangre and talk to him about it too. On Sunday, after vespers, we might hold a meeting at the cathedral to decide about this."

On Sunday, Monsieur Maffre brought Monsieur Rastoil. They found Abbé Faujas and Monsieur Delangre in a little room adjoining the vestry. The gentlemen proved to be very enthusiastic. A decision to form a boys' club was voted; only they battled for some time about the best name for the club. Monsieur Maffre was determined that it should be called "Jesus Club". Finally the rector lost his patience over this.

"Ah, no!" he exclaimed. "You wouldn't get anyone; the few boys who did join would be laughed at. You must see that religion can't be thrust into the scheme; on the contrary, I mean to leave religion on the doorstep outside. All we are after is to give young fellows decent amusement, and so win them over to our side—nothing more."

The police magistrate was looking at the presiding judge in such surprise and dismay that Monsieur Delangre had to put his head down to conceal a smile. He gave the priest's cassock a discreet tug. So Faujas calmed down and continued more softly:

"I don't suppose you have any doubts about me, gentlemen. So will you kindly leave the running to me, please. I propose we choose just a simple name; this, for example: "Youth Club", which means just what it says."

Monsieur Rastoil and Monsieur Maffre gave way, though the name seemed a little uninspiring to them: They then talked about appointing the rector chairman of a provisional committee.

"I believe," murmured Monsieur Delangre, giving Abbé Faujas a glance, "that this wouldn't fall in with the ideas of the rector."

"Of course, I say no," said the priest, with a slight shrug of his shoulders; "my cassock would scare off those who were shy or luke-warm. We should only get the pious lads, and they're not the ones for whom we are opening this club. We want to gather in the stray sheep, in a word, make disciples—isn't that so?"

"Why, of course," answered the presiding magistrate.

"Very well, it will be better for us to keep in the background, especially myself. This is what I propose to you. Your son, Monsieur Rastoil, and yours, Monsieur Delangre, alone shall be to the front. The idea for this club shall be theirs. Send them to me tomorrow, and I'll go into it all fully with them. I already have suitable premises in view, and draft articles prepared. And, as for your two sons, Monsieur Maffre, they of course shall head the list of members."

The presiding judge seemed flattered by the part allotted to his son. And so these proposals were agreed, in spite of opposition from the police magistrate, who had hoped to win some credit from the formation of the club. The very next day, Séverin Rastoil and Lucien Delangre got into touch with Abbé Faujas. Séverin was a tall young man of twenty-five, with an ill-shaped head, a slow brain, who had just been called to the Bar thanks to the position occupied by his father. His father was anxiously trying to get him an appointment as a deputy prosecutor, having little hope of his working up a practice. Lucien on the other hand was short, quick-eyed, sharp-headed, and pleaded with the assurance of an old hand, though younger by a year; the *Plassans Gazette* talked of him as a coming light at the Bar. It was to him especially that Abbé Faujas gave the minutest instructions; the son of the presiding judge did the errands, bursting with importance. In three weeks the Youth Club was formed and already installed.

Lying under the Church of the Minims, at the end of Sauvaire Place, there were large dependencies and an old convent refectory, no longer in use. These were the premises that Abbé Faujas had in view. The clergy of the parish were very willing to hand them over. So one morning the provisional committee of the Youth Club put the workmen in, among these rather cellar-like rooms. The worthy people of Plassans were amazed when they realized that a café was being installed actually underneath the church. But by the fifth day, doubt was no longer possible; a café indeed it was. Settees were going in, marble-topped tables, chairs, two billiard tables, three casefuls of crockery and glass. A doorway was opened

the far end of the building, as far away as possible from the altar of the Minims. Long red curtains—restaurant curtains, were put up inside the glass door, and there were five stone steps to go down before pushing it open. The first thing one saw was a roomy hall, then beyond it to the right, a smaller room and a reading-room. Finally, in a square-shaped one at the far end, two billiard tables had been installed. They stood just under the high altar.

"Ah, you poor things, I pity you," said Guillaume Porquier one day when he happened to meet the Maffre boys on Sauvaire Place; "so they're going to serve you a mass, now, between two games of bezique."

Ambroise and Alphonse begged him not to speak with them any more in broad daylight, because their father had threatened to put them into the navy if they had anything more to do with him. The truth was that, once the first sensation had died down, the Youth Club was having a great success. The bishop had agreed to become honorary president; he even came there one evening, accompanied by his young secretary, Abbé Surin; each of them drank a glassful of red-currant syrup in the smaller room and the glass used by his lordship was respectfully kept on a dresser. This little episode is still affectionately recalled in Plassans. And the visit led to the enrolment of all the better class boys; it was quite bad form not to be a member of the Youth Club.

Meanwhile, Guillaume Porquier used to come prowling round the place, chuckling like a wolf-cub dreaming of a raid on the sheep-fold. The Maffre boys, in spite of their awful fear of their father, adored this tall, shameless young man who told them stories about Paris and treated them to choice excursions into the surrounding country. So they finally arranged to meet him every Saturday evening at nine, on a bench along the road under the town walls. They used to get away from the club and chat till eleven in the dark shadows under the plane-trees. And Guillaume used to harp on their evenings spent under the Church of the Minims.

"You're still simple enough, you chaps," he said, "to let yourselves be led by the nose. It's the verger, isn't it, who serves you with glasses of sugared water, as if he was administering communion?"

"No, you're wrong, I tell you," Ambroise assured him. "You'd really think you were in one of the cafés on the Place, the Café de France or the Travellers' Café. You drink beer, punch, madeira, in fact anything you like, everything you have in other places."

But Guillaume went on laughing and jeering.

"Even so," he said, "I wouldn't touch any of their beastly stuff; I'd be too afraid they were doping it with some drug to make me go to confession. I bet you play forfeits and kisses for a drink, or hot cockles?"

The Maffre boys laughed heartily at these jokes. But they told him he was wrong all the same, that even card-playing was allowed. There wasn't a churchy atmosphere at all. And you were very comfortable there, the settees were good, and there were mirrors all round.

"Come, you won't make me believe that you don't hear the organ going, when there's a celebration on, in the evening, at the Minims. The mere thought that baptizing, marrying and burying was going on overhead would make me swallow down my small coffee the wrong way."

"There's some truth in that," said Alphonse. "The other day, I was having a game of billiards with Séverin in the daytime and we distinctly heard them reading the funeral service up above. It was the little daughter of the butcher who lives at the corner of Banne Street. Séverin here is such an ass; he thought he could scare me by telling me that the burial crowd were going to tumble through on to my head."

"Ah, there's a nice club for you!" cried Guillaume. "I wouldn't put a foot in it for all the gold in the world. You might just as well have your coffee in a vestry."

Guillaume really was very offended not to be a member. His father had told him not to put himself up, being afraid that he might not get in. But his annoyance was too much for him; he applied for membership without a word of warning beforehand to anyone. This made a great to-do. The committee that dealt with requests for admission included the two Maffre boys. Lucien Delangre was chairman, and Séverin Rastoil secretary. The young fellows were in a dreadful quandary. Though they didn't like to back the application, they didn't want to make themselves disagreeable to Dr. Porquier—such a worthy man, with such excellent cravats, so completely trusted by all the best ladies. Ambroise and Alphonse begged Guillaume not to press things further, hinting that he didn't stand a chance.

"All right, let it go!" Guillaume replied. "You're cowards, both of you. Do you think I'm really keen on joining your brotherhood? It's just a leg-pull of mine. I want to see whether you have the guts

me out. A nice laugh I'll have, on the day the cassocks slam door in my face. And as for you two fellows, you can go and use yourselves where you like; I shall never speak to you again."

In consternation about this, the two Maffre boys begged Lucien Delangre to patch up things so as to avoid an outburst. Lucien put the problem to his standing adviser, Abbé Faujas, for whom he had formed a disciple's admiration. Every afternoon, from five to six, the priest came to the Youth Club. He used to walk through the hall in the friendliest way, with a word for everyone, stopping sometimes and standing at a table to talk for a few minutes with some group. He never accepted a drink, not even a glass of plain water. Then he used to go into the reading room, sit down at the large table covered with a green cloth, attentively read all the newspapers taken in by the club, the Legitimist papers from Paris and the neighbouring departments. Sometimes he would quickly jot some point down in a little note-book. After this he discreetly withdrew, again smiling at the members and shaking their hands. On some days, however, he would stay longer, watch a chess game with interest and talk cheerfully on every subject. The young fellows liked him very much. "When he talks," they said, "you'd never think he was a priest."

When the mayor's son told him about the difficult position created for the membership committee by Guillaume's request, Abbé Faujas promised to intervene. And, sure enough, the next day he saw Dr. Porquier and told him about the affair. The doctor was very downcast. Did his son want to make him die of shame, then, by dishonouring his white hairs? And what were they to decide now? If the request was withdrawn, the dishonour would be just as great. The priest advised him to exile Guillaume for two or three months to a country estate which he had some miles away; the rest he would see to himself. The solution found was very simple. As soon as Guillaume had gone away, the membership committee put his request to one side, declaring that there was no hurry and that a decision would be taken later on.

Dr. Porquier heard of this arrangement through Lucien Delangre, one afternoon when he was in the garden at Government House. He ran to the terrace. It was the hour when Abbé Faujas read his breviary; there he was, sitting under the Mourets' arbour.

"Ah, rector, what thanks I owe you!" said the doctor, leaning down. "I should be very glad to shake you by the hand."

"It's rather high," answered the priest, looking at the wall with

a smile. But Dr. Porquier was a very effusive man, and not to be discouraged by obstacles.

"Wait!" he cried. "If you'll allow, rector, I'll come round."

And he disappeared. The priest, still smiling, walked slowly towards the little door opening on to the Chevillottes cul-de-sac. The doctor was already knocking on the wood with discreet little knocks.

"The door happens to be nailed up," said the priest, "but one of the nails is broken. If one had a tool, it wouldn't be difficult to get the other out."

He looked about and saw a spade. Without much trouble he opened the door, after pulling back the bolts. Then he stepped out into the lane, where Dr. Porquier overwhelmed him with kind words. As they walked along the lane chatting together, Monsieur Maffre, who happened to be in Monsieur Rastoil's garden at the time, also opened the corresponding little door tucked away behind the cascade. And the three of them had a good laugh about meeting this way in the empty lane.

They stayed there a little time. As they took leave of the priest, the police magistrate and the doctor poked their heads into the Mourets' garden and looked round curiously.

Mouret, who happened to be fixing stakes for his tomato plants, looked up and saw them. He stood there, dumb with surprise.

"Well now!" he muttered. "Coming in here, are they? It only remains for the priest to bring in both gangs!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SERGE was now nineteen. He had a little room up on the second floor, opposite the priest's apartment, where he lived almost cloistered in, reading a great deal.

"I'll have to throw your books in the fire," Mouret used to say to him angrily. "You'll end by taking to your bed."

And indeed the young man was so highly strung that the merest indiscretion gave him girlish upsets, trifles that confined him to his room for two or three days. Rose then used to soak him with her concoctions and when Mouret came up to shake him up a bit, as he put it, if the cook was there she used to turn her master out, and call:

"Let him alone, the lamb! Can't you see you're the death of him with your roughness! Ah no, he doesn't take after you, he's the very image of his mother, and you'll never understand either of them."

Serge used to smile. His father, seeing how delicate the boy was, hesitated to send him straight off after leaving school to study law in Paris. He wouldn't hear of a provincial university. Paris, he said, was the place for a lad who wanted to go far. He worked up great ambition in his son, saying that thicker heads—his Rougon cousins for example—had got on very nicely. Every time the young man seemed to be in good shape, he fixed his departure for the early days of the following month. But either the trunk wasn't ready, or the lad was coughing a bit, and once again the date was put off. Each time Marthe, with her mild indifference, was content with murmuring:

"He's not twenty yet. It's hardly wise to send such a boy off to Paris. Besides he's not wasting his time here. You yourself say he works too hard."

Serge used to go to mass with his mother. His mind was very religious, very sensitive and serious. As Dr. Porquier had advised plenty of exercise for him, he had become quite devoted to botany, went for excursions and then spent his afternoons drying plants

that he had collected, sticking them in, classifying and labelling them. It was then that Abbé Faujas became his great friend. The priest had done some botanizing in the past; he gave Serge various practical hints for which the young man was very grateful. They exchanged a few books, they went out together one day to search for a plant which the priest said must be growing in that locality. When Serge was unwell, every morning he had a visit from his neighbour, who talked quite a time at his bedside. On other days when he was up and about again, it was his turn to tap at Abbé Faujas' door, as soon as he heard him walking round his room. They were only divided by the narrow landing, and eventually almost lived in each other's rooms.

Often Mouret would get angrier still, in spite of his impassive calm and the irritated look in Rose's eyes.

"What can he be doing up there, the young devil?" he grumbled. "I spend whole days without setting eyes on him. He's been out of the priest's room; they're always chatting in corners. He shall go to Paris right away. He's as fit as a fiddle. All those spots and things are just shamming to get potted. It's as if the two looking at me like that, I won't have the good thing of a laddie into a little saint."

So then he kept watch on his son. When he thought he saw the priest, he used to call up the stairs roughly.

"I'd rather he was going to see women!" he shouted in his exasperation.

"Oh, monsieur!" said Rose. "That's abominable in your ideas."

"Yes, women! And I'll take him there myself. If you don't like it with your priestly business."

Serge of course belonged to the Youth Club. He went there often, though, as he preferred being by himself. But for the presence of Abbé Faujas, whom he met there occasionally, no doubt he would never have gone to the club at all. The priest taught him how to play chess in the reading-room. Mouret, learning that his son was meeting the priest, even in cafés, swore that he would take him off to the railway station the very next Monday. The train was packed, and no nonsense this time, when Serge, wanting to spend one last morning in the open country, came home soaking after a sudden shower. He had to go to bed, teeth chattering with fever. For three weeks he hung between life and death, and his convalescence lasted two long months. During the earlier days especially,

he was so weak that he lay with his head propped up on pillows and his arms extended over the bed, like a figure in wax.

"It's your fault, monsieur," the cook used to call out to Mouret. "If the child dies, you'll have that on your conscience."

So long as his son was in danger Mouret, eyes reddened with tears, used to roam about the house in silent gloom. He rarely went upstairs, just tramped the hall, waiting to catch the doctor on his way out. When he heard that Serge was out of danger he slipped into the sick-room, offering to help. But Rose sent him out; they didn't need him, the boy wasn't strong enough yet to stand his rough ways; it would be better if he went about his own business, instead of cluttering up the room like that. So then Mouret was left all alone on the ground floor, feeling sadder and more useless than ever. When he went through the hall, he could often hear the voice of Abbé Faujas up above; he was spending entire afternoons at the bedside with Serge, during his convalescence.

"And how is he today, monsieur le curé?" Mouret would timidly ask, when the priest came down to the garden.

"Fairly well. It will be a long business, he needs great care."

And then he went out and quietly read his breviary, while the father, secateurs in hand, would follow him along the paths, trying to pick up the conversation to get more detailed news about the "laddie". As convalescence progressed, he noticed that the priest was hardly ever out of Serge's room. And several times when the women weren't there he went upstairs, but always found the priest quietly sitting beside the young man, talking softly with him, helping with little things such as sweetening his lime infusion, pulling up the blankets, giving him things he wanted. And all through the house there was this gentle murmuring, words passing in a low voice between Marthe and Rose, a special subdued atmosphere which made the second floor seem like some passage in a convent. Mouret thought he could almost smell incense in his house; sometimes it seemed to him as though the discreet babble of voices upstairs meant that someone was saying mass.

"What are they up to?" he wondered. "Yet the laddie's out of danger; they can hardly be giving him extreme unction."

Serge himself worried him. He was like a girl, in his white linen. His eyes had become larger; his smile was a soft ecstasy of the lips which stayed with him through extreme pain. Mouret didn't dare mention Paris any longer, so feminine, so chaste did the dear sufferer seem to him.

One afternoon he climbed up the stairs, softening the sound of his footsteps. Through the gap in the door, which was just open, he could see Serge sitting in the sunlight in an armchair. The young man was crying with his eyes lifted to the heavens, while his mother beside him was sobbing too. At the sound of the door they both turned, without wiping their eyes. And at once Serge began speaking in his weak convalescent's voice.

"Father," he said, "I have a favour to ask of you. Mother says that you will be angry, that you will refuse the permission that would fill me with joy. I want to become a priest and enter the seminary."

His hands were now clasped together in a kind of feverish devotion.

"You! you!" Mouret murmured.

Then he looked at Marthe, whose head was turned away. He said nothing further, went to the window, came back and sat down at the foot of the bed, mechanically, as though stunned by this blow.

"Father," said Serge after a long silence, "when I was so near to death, I saw God. I swore to be His. I assure you that all my joy lies there. Believe me; don't drive me to despair."

Mouret, with a gloomy face and eyes fixed on the ground, still had no word to say. He made a gesture, like a man completely disheartened, and murmured:

"If I had any courage at all, I'd roll two shirts up in a handkerchief and go away."

Then he rose, went to the window, and drummed on it with his fingers. Just as Serge was going to implore him again, he said, quite simply:

"No, no; it's agreed. Go into the church, my boy."

And he went out. The next day, without telling anyone, he set off for Marseilles where he spent a week with his son Octave. When he came back, he was thoughtful, and had aged. Octave had given him little consolation. He had found him leading a gay life, riddled with debts and hiding mistresses in cupboards. However, his lips remained closed on all this. He now became very sedentary, never carried out another of those famous deals of his, buying up standing crops, which were his glory and pride in the past. Rose noticed that he was adopting almost complete silence, that he even avoided greeting Abbé Faujas.

"Do you know you're not at all polite?" she boldly said to him one day. "The rector just went by, and you turned your back on him. Well, if it's because of the boy, you're wrong. The rector didn't

him to enter the seminary; he gave him a good talking-to about it, and I heard him. . . . Ah, a bright house we've got, now! I'm not talking at all, even with the mistress; when you sit down to table, it's like a burial. I'm beginning to get tired of it, monsieur."

Mouret was walking out of the room, but the cook pursued him into the garden.

"Why aren't you happy to see the child on his feet again? He ate a cutlet yesterday, the cherub, and with a good appetite too. Much you care, eh? You wanted to turn him into a pagan like yourself. Ay, you're sadly in need of prayers; the heavenly Father wants us all to be saved. If I were you, I'd be shedding tears of joy to think how that precious young heart will be praying for me. But you, monsieur, you're made of stone. Ah, and won't he look sweet, the lamb, in his cassock!"

So now Mouret took to going up to the first floor. There he used to shut himself up in a room which he called his bureau; it was a large bare place only containing a table and two chairs. This room became his refuge when the cook was hunting him down. He got bored there, came down again to the garden, which he cultivated with greater care. Marthe seemed to be quite unaware of her husband's sulky moods; he used to remain silent a whole week sometimes, and she was neither worried nor angry. Each day she was isolating herself more and more from her surroundings. She even thought that Mouret had reasoned with himself, built up a little world of happiness within himself, just as she had. This was because the house was quiet now, and Mouret's scolding voice was no longer heard at all hours of the day; this soothed her, justified her in plunging deeper into her dream. When he looked at her out of dim eyes, hardly recognizing her, she used to smile at him; she did not see the tears brimming under his eyelids.

On the day that Serge, now completely cured, entered the seminary, Mouret was left alone in the house with Désirée. He often looked after her now. She was a big girl, close on sixteen, yet she might easily fall into the garden pool or set fire to the house by playing with matches like a little thing of six. When Marthe came home she found the doors standing open and the rooms empty; the house seemed very bare. She stepped down on to the terrace and saw her husband playing with the girl at the end of a path. There he was, sitting on the ground by the sand-heap, using a little wooden spade and solemnly filling a handcart which Désirée was holding by a string.

"Gee up! gee up!" she called.

"Wait now," he patiently replied; "it isn't full yet; if you want to play horses, you must wait till it's full."

Then she stamped her feet like a horse getting restive, and unable to stand still, started off laughing loudly. The hardcart bounced, the sand spilt out. And when she had been round the garden, she came back calling:

"Fill it again! Another fill!"

Mouret filled it again with little spadefuls. All this time Marthe had been standing on the terrace, watching, feeling rather touched and not very happy. These open doors, the empty house, and the man playing in this way with the child saddened her somehow, though she had no very clear idea of what was going on inside herself. She went upstairs to change, and heard Rose who had also come in, saying out loud, as she stood at the top of the terrace steps:

"Goodness! what a fool the master is!"

If one listened to his friends in Sauvaire Place, the retired people with whom he took his daily stroll, Mouret "had it". His hair had turned grey in a few short months, he was unsteady on his legs, he was no longer the sharp-tongued scoffer that the whole town used to dread. For a time it was thought that he had been indulging in risky speculation and was wilting after heavy losses.

Madame Paloque, as she leaned out of her dining-room window overlooking Balande Street, even remarked that he was in bad shape, every time she saw him coming out. And if Abbé Faujas was crossing the street a few minutes later, she liked to exclaim, especially when she had people in the house:

"Now do look at the rector! Putting on flesh nicely! If he was eating out of the same plate as Monsieur Mouret, one would say that Mouret only got the bones."

She laughed, and people laughed with her. Abbé Faujas was indeed getting grand; he had nice black gloves, and his cassock fairly shone. And he produced a special smile, an ironic little crease about the lips, when Madame de Condamin congratulated him on looking so well. The ladies liked him to be well turned out, snug and glossy-looking. But his dream, no doubt, was rather of the fighter, fists up, arms bare, and let the coat go hang. But when he neglected his appearance, the slightest comment from Madame Rougon would put things right; he would smile, go off and buy silk stockings, a new hat or sash. He was hard on his clothes; that big frame of his told on the seams.

Ever since the foundation of the Hospice of the Virgin all the women were with him. They defended him against the unpleasant tales that still sometimes passed about, though where they came from no one could exactly make out. They did find him a little harsh now and then, but his rough way was not really displeasing, especially during confession, when the feel of that iron hand on the back of one's neck was quite pleasant.

"My dear," said Madame de Condamin to Marthe one day, "he scolded me yesterday. I believe he would have beaten me, if there had been no partition between us. Oh, he's not always easy to get on with!"

She gave a little laugh, still relishing that difference with her confessor. It must be admitted that Madame de Condamin thought Marthe looked a little pale when she vouchsafed certain confidences about the rector's way of hearing confession; she guessed that Marthe was jealous, and found malicious pleasure in tormenting her with quite a stream of these intimate details.

After the formation of the Youth Club, Abbé Faujas became quite good-natured; he was a new person. Under pressure from his will, his stern nature bent like soft wax. He allowed people to hear about his share in the creation of the club, became friendly with all the young fellows in the town, watched himself more closely, knowing that ex-schoolboys don't fancy rough handling quite so much as the women. He nearly lost his temper with young Rastoil, threatened to pull his ears over some altercation about the inside management of the club; but then, almost immediately, with surprising self-control, he held out a hand, abased himself, won the bystanders over to the side of "that Saturnin giant", as they called him, by his good grace in tendering apologies.

If the rector had won over the wives and young people, he was still on a footing of simple politeness with the fathers and husbands. Grave personages still held aloof, when they saw him keeping clear of any political group. At Government House Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies was keenly critical, while Monsieur Delangre, without putting up a definite defence, still said with knowing smiles that one ought to wait before judging him. In Monsieur Rastoil's house, he had become quite a disturber of domestic peace. Séverin and his mother dinned praise into the ears of the presiding judge till he was tired.

"Very well, very well!" their victim cried. "We'll say he has all the qualities you wish. That's agreed, now let me be. I had him

invited to dine and he did not come. You can hardly expect me to go out and take him by the arm to fetch him in."

"But, my dear," said Madame Rastoil, "when you meet him, you scarcely raise your hat. That must be why he's offended."

"Obviously," added Séverin; "he sees plainly enough that you're not with him as you should be."

Monsieur Rastoil shrugged his shoulders. When Monsieur de Bourdeu was there, the pair of them accused Abbé Faujas of leaning towards the Government party. Madame Rastoil pointed out that he had never even shown his nose there.

"I am certainly not accusing him of being a Bonapartist," said the presiding judge. "I said he was leaning that way, that's all. He has had dealings with Monsieur Delangre."

"But you yourself have had dealings with the mayor! There are circumstances when one must. It would be much better if you simply said that you cannot stand Abbé Faujas."

Then everybody sulked for whole days in the Rastoil household. Abbé Fenil was only coming rarely now; he said gout was riveting him indoors. And on two occasions, when challenged to give his views on the rector of St. Saturnin, he had praised him, in a few brief words. Abbé Surin and Abbé Bourrette, likewise Monsieur Maffre, were always on the side of the mistress of the house. So the opposition came solely from the presiding judge, backed up by Monsieur de Bourdeu; both gravely declared that they couldn't compromise themselves politically by inviting a man who kept his opinions dark.

So then, just to tease, Séverin hit on the idea of going and knocking at the door in Chevillottes Lane when he wanted a word with the priest. And gradually the lane became neutral ground. Dr. Porquier, who had been the first to use this route, young Delangre, the police magistrate, without any party distinction, came along that way when they wanted to talk with Abbé Faujas. Sometimes, during a whole afternoon, the little doors at the end of both gardens, as well as the carriage gate to Government House, remained wide open. And there stood the priest, at the end of the cul-de-sac, leaning against the wall, giving handshakes to any member of either group who was so good as to come and say good-day. But Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies pretended that he did not care to walk outside the garden of Government House, while Monsieur Rastoil and Monsieur de Bourdeu, equally determined not to be seen in the lane, remained in their chairs under the trees beside the

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Rarely did the priest's little court venture in under Monsieur Mouret's arbour. Only now and then a head would poke in, peep around, then disappear.

And Abbé Faujas was quite at home; the only thing that claimed his uneasy glances was the Trouches' upstairs window, where Olympe's eyes might be gleaming at any hour of the day. For the Trouches were on constant watch behind the red curtains, gnawed by a raging desire to come down too, to taste of the fruits and talk with the fine company. They tapped on the shutters, leaned out a moment, drew their heads in again, furious, quelled by the priest's commanding eye; then back they would come creeping, stick their white faces to a corner of the glass, watching his every movement, in anguish at the sight of their relation calmly enjoying this forbidden paradise.

"It's too bad!" said Olympe one day to her husband. "If he could, he'd stuff us into a wardrobe, just to have all the pleasure. Let's go down, shall we? We'll see what he says."

Trouche had just got home from his office. He changed his collar, dusted his boots, wishing to look quite the thing. Olympe put on a light dress. Then bravely they walked down, and into the garden, taking mincing steps along the high box hedges, pausing to admire the flowers. At that moment Abbé Faujas happened to have his back turned; he was talking with Monsieur Maffre, standing on the doorstep in the garden wall. When he heard the crunch of the sand, the Trouches were right behind him, under the arbour. He turned round, stopped dead in the middle of a sentence, amazed to see them there. Monsieur Maffre, who did not know them, was looking at them with curiosity.

"Very nice weather, isn't it, gentlemen?" said Olympe, who had turned pale on encountering her brother's eyes.

The priest abruptly dragged the police magistrate away into the lane, where he got rid of him.

"He's furious," murmured Olympe. "It's too late now: we'll have to stay. If we went back now he would think we were afraid. I'm fed up. I'm going to talk to him; you'll see how."

And she made Trouche sit down on one of the chairs which Rose had brought out a moment or so before. When the priest came back into the garden, there they were, calmly sitting down. He bolted the little door, took a look to make sure that they were safely hidden by the leaves. Then he came up and began speaking in a subdued voice:

"You're forgetting our agreement; you promised to keep to your quarters."

"It's too hot upstairs," Olympe answered. "We're not committing a crime in coming out here for a breath of air."

The priest was on the point of flying into a temper. But his sister, white as she was with the strain of this battle, added in a peculiar tone:

"Don't shout; there are people in the next garden. You might do yourself harm."

The Trouches both gave a little laugh. He looked at them, put a hand to his brow, with a silent devastating effect.

"Sit down," said Olympe. "You want an explanation from us, don't you? Well, here it is. We're tired of being shut in, while you are living here like a fighting-cock. The house belongs to you, the garden belongs to you. Very nice; we're glad to see things going well with you, but that's no reason why we should be treated like tramps. You've never even thought of bringing me up a bunch of grapes; you've given us the worst room; you hide us away, you shut us in, you're ashamed of us as if we had the plague. This can't go on, do you understand?"

"I am not the master here," said Abbé Faujas. "Speak to Monsieur Mouret, if you want to sack the place."

The Trouches exchanged another smile.

"We're not asking you about your business," continued Olympe. "We know a thing or two, and that's enough. All this goes to prove that you've got a bad heart. Do you think that if we were in your shoes, we wouldn't tell you to take your share?"

"But come, what is it you want of me?" asked the priest. "Do you think I am rolling in gold? You know my room; my furniture's worse than yours. I can hardly hand you over this house. It isn't mine."

Olympe shrugged her shoulders. Her husband was about to reply, but she signed to him to be quiet, and calmly went on:

"Everyone looks at life in their own way. Even if you had millions you wouldn't buy a bedside-mat: you'd spend your money on some big, silly business. Now we like comfort in the home. You dare tell us that if you wanted the best furniture in the house, and the linen and food and all, you wouldn't have them by tonight? Well, a good brother, in a case like this, would have already thought of his relations; he wouldn't leave them in the muck, as you have done."

Abbé Faujas looked searchingly at the couple. They were both loling on their chairs.

"You're ungrateful," he said to them, after a pause. "I have already done a good deal for you. If you're eating bread today, you owe it to me; because I've still got your letters, Olympe, letters begging me to save you from misery by bringing you here to Plassans. And now that you're with me, and your living is assured, you begin asking for more——"

"Bah!" Trouche insolently interrupted, "if you sent for us, it was because you needed us. I've learned to my cost not to believe in anyone's fine sentiments. I let my wife do the talking just now, but women never get down to facts. In two words, my dear friend, you're wrong to cage us up, like faithful watch-dogs that you only bring out when danger threatens. We're getting bored, we shall end by doing something you'll regret. Give us a bit of freedom, dammit! Since the house isn't yours and you despise good things, what does it matter to you if we see to our own comfort? We shan't take to eating the walls, I suppose?"

"Of course," Olympe chimed in, "anyone would go mad, always locked up. We'll be very good. You know that my husband's only waiting the call. Go your way, count on us; but we want our share. So that's agreed, isn't it?"

Abbé Faujas had looked down; he stayed like this a moment, thinking. Then, looking up, he said, without giving a direct answer:

"Listen, if you ever become a hindrance to me, I swear that I'll send you back to your hole to die on straw."

Then he went upstairs, leaving them under the arbour. And from that moment, the Trouches came down to the garden almost daily, but they shewed some tact: they avoided being there at times when the priest was talking with people from the next-door gardens.

Next week Olympe complained so much about the room she occupied, that Marthe obligingly offered her Serge's room, which was standing empty. The Trouches kept the two rooms. They slept in the young man's discarded bedroom, from which indeed no furniture was removed, and turned the other into a kind of lounge; for this Rose managed to find in the attic an old velvet settee. Olympe, in great delight, went and ordered herself a pink morning wrap from the best dressmaker in Plassans.

Mouret, forgetting one evening that Marthe had asked him to

spare Serge's room, was greatly surprised to find the Trouches in there. He had come up to find a knife that the young man must have left in the back of some drawer. And there was Trouche using this very knife to trim a walking-stick of pear-wood, which he had just cut for himself in the garden. So Mouret apologized and went downstairs again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

At the public procession on Corpus Christi Day, in Government Square, when the bishop came down the steps from the magnificent altar provided by the kindness of Madame de Condamin, at the very door of the little mansion where she lived, it was noticed with surprise that his lordship turned his back sharply on the rector, Abbé Faujas.

"Hallo," said Madame Rougon, who was watching from her window, "has there been a break?"

"Didn't you know?" answered Madame Paloque, who was leaning out beside her. "There's been talk about it since yesterday. Abbé Fenil is back in favour."

Monsieur de Condamin, who was standing behind the ladies, began to laugh. He had deserted his own house, saying that "it reeked of church".

"Ah well," he said, "if you must dwell on these little stories! The bishop's a weathercock; as Faujas or Fenil blows, he veers accordingly; it's one today and t'other tomorrow. They've quarrelled and made it up at least ten times. You'll see: three more days and Faujas will be the spoilt darling."

"I don't think so," Madame Paloque replied; "it's in earnest this time. Apparently Abbé Faujas is causing his lordship all sorts of difficulties. He is said to have preached sermons in the past which were not at all to the liking of Rome. I can't tell you the whole story myself, but I know that his lordship has been receiving letters of reproach, warning him to be on his guard. Abbé Faujas is alleged to be a political agent."

"Oh, who's saying that?" asked Madame Rougon, screwing up her eyes as if to follow the procession now moving down Banne Street.

"It's what I've heard, I don't remember now," said the judge's wife, with an indifferent air. She then got up, to move to the next

hour affair, like a battle of servant-mistresses competing for an old man's favours. And the bishop smiled a cunning smile; he had contrived a sort of balance between these two opposing wills, used one to fight the other, enjoyed seeing each laid low in turn, always accepting the attentions of the stronger as the price of peace. As for the unkind things that people conveyed to him about his favourites, he listened to these with extreme indulgence; he knew they were quite capable of accusing each other of murder.

"You see, my child," he used to say to Abbé Surin in his moments of confidence, "they're both as bad as the other. I think Paris will eventually win and Rome lose, but I'm not quite quite sure. So in the meantime I let them go on trying to demolish each other. When one demolishes the other completely, then we shall see. Here, read me the third ode of Horace; there's a line here which I fear I've translated badly."

On the Tuesday following the Corpus Christi procession, the weather was lovely. Laughter rang in Monsieur Rastoil's garden, likewise in the garden of Government House; in both there was a goodly gathering under the trees. In the Mourets' garden lying between, Abbé Faujas was, as usual, reading his breviary and softly walking by the high box hedges. For the last few days he had been keeping the lane door shut; he was coquetting with his neighbours, seemed to be hiding to make himself desirable. Perhaps he had noticed a slight cooling off, due to his last break with the bishop and the abominable stories circulated by his enemies.

About five o'clock, as the sun was getting lower, Abbé Surin suggested a game of badminton to the Rastoil girls. He was a first-rate player and Angéline and Aurélie, though nearing thirty, adored little games; their mother would have kept them in short frocks if she had dared. When the maid had brought out the racquets, Abbé Surin looked about for a cool spot in the garden, which was still very sunny. Then an idea occurred to him:

"Supposing we went into the lane outside? We should be under the shade of the chestnut trees and we should have a far better run-back."

The young ladies eagerly approved, so out they went and a most enjoyable game began. The two girls started play. Angéline was the first to miss the shuttlecock, and Abbé Surin took her place. He wielded the racquet with a command, a skill that were truly masterly. Tucking his cassock between his legs, he bounded forward and back and sideways, made returns from ground level, caught the

shuttlecock at amazing heights with a back-hand, sent it shooting like a bullet, or looping in elegant curves with perfect precision. As a rule, he preferred to play with weak opponents who made returns anyhow, without any rhythm, as he put it, thus compelling him to display the full range of his strokes. Miss Aurélie played a pretty game; she let off little swallow-shrieks as she made each stroke and laughed like mad when the shuttlecock went straight for the young priest's nose; then she crouched in her skirts to await a return or took little hops backward with a wonderful noise of rustling materials, when the priest tricked her by hitting harder. At last the shuttlecock came flying into her hair and lodged there; this nearly made her topple over backwards and caused such merriment among the three. Angéline took her place. And every time Abbé Faujas looked up from his breviary in Mouret's garden, he saw the white shuttlecock flying to and fro like a large butterfly, above the top of the garden wall.

"Are you there, rector?" called Angéline, knocking at the little door. "Our shuttlecock has gone over your wall."

The priest picked up the shuttlecock which had dropped at his feet, and decided to open the door.

"Ah, thank you, rector!" said Aurélie, who had already taken over the racquet. "Trust Angéline to make strokes like that. The other day when Papa was watching us she sent the thing into his ear, and so hard that he was deaf till the next day."

There was another sally of laughter. Abbé Surin was as pink as a girl; delicately he mopped his brow with little dabs, using a dainty handkerchief. He swept his fair hair back behind his ears; his eyes were shining, his figure was supple, he was using his racquet as a fan. In the ardour of enjoyment his bands had slewed round a little.

"Now, rector," he said as he moved into position, "you be umpire."

Abbé Faujas took his stand in the doorway, with his breviary tucked under his arm, smiling in fatherly fashion. Meanwhile, he must have had a glimpse, through the partly open gates at Government House, of Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies sitting by the pool in the company of his familiars. But he did not look round; he was keeping the score, congratulating Abbé Surin and consoling the Rastoil girls.

"I say, Péqueur," said Monsieur de Condamin, sauntering over and murmuring agreeably into the sub-prefect's ear, "it's a

you don't invite that young priest to your evenings; he gets on very well with the ladies and must waltz delightfully."

But Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, who was talking away fast with Monsieur Delangre, did not seem to hear. He went on speaking to the mayor:

"Really, my dear fellow, I don't know where you find all these fine qualities that you're claiming to see in him. No, on the contrary, Abbé Faujas is a highly compromising person. His past is very suspect, certain tales are going round here. I don't see why I should be at the knees of this rector, especially as the clergy in Plassans are hostile to us. Just now it wouldn't help me at all."

Monsieur Delangre and Monsieur de Condamin, after exchanging glances, merely shook their heads without giving any reply.

"No, not at all," continued the sub-prefect. "There's no need for you to be mysterious about it. Look, I wrote to Paris. I didn't know what to think; I wanted to be clear about this Faujas, whom you seem to regard as a prince incognito. Well, do you know what their reply was? Their reply was that he wasn't known, that there was nothing to tell me, that moreover I must be careful not to meddle with the affairs of the clergy. They're already rather disgruntled in Paris since that idiot Lagrifoul got in. I take a prudent line, you understand."

The mayor exchanged another glance with the Keeper of Woods and Waters. He even shrugged his shoulders slightly, right in front of the admirably groomed moustache of Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies.

"Now listen to me," he said, after a pause; "you want to become prefect, don't you?"

The sub-prefect smiled and swung gently on his chair.

"Then go at once and give a shake of your hand to Abbé Faujas, who's waiting for you down in the lane, watching that game of badminton."

Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies remained silent, very surprised, not knowing what to think. He looked up at Monsieur de Condamin, and asked him with a certain uneasiness:

"Is that your opinion too?"

"Why, of course; go and shake his hand," answered the Keeper of Woods and Waters.

Then he added with a slightly mocking note:

"Ask my wife, in whom you have complete confidence."

Madame de Condamin was coming towards them. Her frock was a lovely thing in pink and grey. When they mentioned the priest to her, she spoke in a gracious way to the sub-prefect:

"Ah, how wrong you are to neglect religion. You are hardly seen at the cathedral, even on days of official ceremony. Truly, it makes me very sad; I must convert you. What do you expect people to think of the government you represent, if you are not on good terms with the heavenly Father? Leave us, gentlemen; I am going to hear Monsieur Péqueur in confession."

She had taken a chair, smiling playfully.

"Octavie," murmured the sub-prefect when they were alone, "you mustn't poke fun at me. At Paris, in Helder Street, you were not pious. You know that I can hardly contain myself, when I see them giving you the consecrated bread at St. Saturnin.

"You are not being serious either, my dear," she answered in the same tone. "You'll be doing yourself a bad turn. Really, you make me uneasy, I've known you to be much more intelligent. Are you so blind that you cannot see your position is shaky? You ought to realize that if they haven't already sacked you, it's only because they don't want to give the alarm to the Legitimists in Plassans. On the day these people see a new sub-prefect arriving, their suspicions will be aroused; whereas with you here they remain asleep, thinking themselves certain of victory at the next elections. All this is not flattering, I know, especially as I am quite certain that they're acting over your head. Do you understand? My dear, you're lost if you don't see certain things."

He looked at her in real alarm.

"Has our 'big man' written to you?" he asked, making allusion to a personage that they so named between themselves.

"No, he's broken with me completely. I am not a fool, I was the first to see that separation was necessary. Besides, I've nothing to complain of: he behaved handsomely, also found me a husband, gave me excellent advice which has proved useful. But I've kept on with friends in Paris. I can swear to you that you have only just time to get a hand up to the branches. Don't be a pagan any longer, go at once and give a handshake to Abbé Faujas. You'll understand later, if you don't want to guess today."

Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies looked down, rather crestfallen at such a lecture. Then he put on the air of the conceited top, showed his white teeth, tried to extricate himself from his ridiculous position by murmuring tenderly:

Ah, if you had wanted, Octavie, we two could have governed Massans together. I did offer to renew those happy days we——"

"Now really, you are a fool," she interrupted angrily. "You annoy me with your 'Octavie'. I'm Madame de Condamin to everybody, my dear-fellow. Can't you understand a thing? My income is thirty thousand francs; I'm queen of a whole sub-prefecture; I go everywhere, I am respected everywhere, acknowledged, liked. Those who might have suspicions about the past would only be the nicer to me for that. What in Heaven's name would I be doing with you? You would be a nuisance to me. I'm a respectable woman, my dear."

She had got up. She walked towards Dr. Porquier who was coming in as usual after his rounds, to spend an hour in the garden with his fashionable patients.

"Oh, doctor! I've a headache, such a headache!" she said with charming airs. "It's got me here, under the left eyebrow."

"That's the heart side, madame," the doctor replied gallantly.

Madame de Condamin smiled, and took the consultation no further. Madame Paloque leaned over towards her husband. (Every day she brought him in, to be a constant reminder for government influence). She whispered in his ear:

"That's the only cure he's got."

Meanwhile Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaics had rejoined Monsieur de Condamin and Monsieur Delangre, and was shepherding them skilfully over towards the carriage gateway. When he was within a few paces he stopped, as if intrigued by the game of badminton still in progress in the lane. Abbé Surin, with his hair all ruffled and the sleeves of his cassock rolled back, displaying wrists of a feminine whiteness and slenderness, had just stepped to the correct distance, putting twenty paces between himself and Mademoiselle Aurélie. He felt he was being watched and was surpassing himself. Mademoiselle Aurélie too was in one of her good days, roused by meeting such a master. The shuttlecock, vigorously launched, described a low and very long curve through the air, and so regularly that it seemed to be landing on the racquets of itself, flying from one to the other in the same easy flight while the players hardly moved about at all. Abbé Surin had his body tipped back a little, and was displaying all the graces of his torso.

"Very good! very good! Well played, monsieur l'abbé." The sub-prefect was delighted.

Then, turning to Madame de Condamin, Dr. Porquier and the Paloques, he said:

"Come along, I've never seen anything to equal this. May we come and admire you, monsieur l'abbé?"

So all the company from Government House came and stood in a group at the end of the lane. Abbé Faujas had not moved a step; he acknowledged the greetings of Monsieur Delangre and Monsieur de Condamin. And he went on scoring points. When Aurélie missed, he said, urbanely:

"That makes you three hundred and ten up, since changing distance; your sister only has forty-seven."

While still appearing to follow the shuttlecock with keen interest, he managed to cast quick glances in the direction of Monsieur Rastoil's door, which had remained wide open. Monsieur Maffre was the only person so far to have appeared. He was hailed from the garden inside.

"What are they laughing about so loudly?" asked Monsieur Rastoil, who was chatting with Monsieur de Bourdeu at the rustic table.

"It's the bishop's secretary playing out there; he's performing wonders; the whole neighbourhood's watching. The rector, who's out there too, is thrilled."

Monsieur de Bourdeu took a large pinch of snuff and muttered:

"Ah, monsieur l'abbé Faujas is there?"

He met Monsieur Rastoil's eyes. Both of them seemed constrained.

"I've been told," he said tentatively, "that the rector has been restored to favour by his lordship."

"Yes, and only this morning," said Monsieur Maffre. "Oh, a complete reconciliation. I heard such pathetic details. His lordship wept. Really, to a certain extent, Abbé Fenil has been in the wrong."

"I thought you were a friend of the vicar-general," Monsieur de Bourdeu remarked.

"Certainly, but I'm a friend of the rector too," the police magistrate quickly replied. "His piety, thank God, defies all slander. People have gone so far as to attack his morality. It's disgraceful!"

The ex-prefect looked at the presiding magistrate with a peculiar air.

"And some people have even tried to compromise the rector in political matters!" Monsieur Maffre continued. "It was said that he came here to turn everything upside down, distribute places right and left and bring about the victory of the Paris clique. They cou"

hardly have said more if they were discussing the leader of a robber band. Just a pack of lies, in fact."

Monsieur de Bourdeu was drawing a face with the tip of his walking-stick in the sandy path.

"Yes, I did hear talk of such things," he said carelessly; "it is very unlikely that a minister of religion would undertake such a rôle. Besides, for the honour of Plassans, I like to think that, if he did, he would fail completely. There's no one who can be bought here."

"Silly gossip!" exclaimed the presiding judge, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Can you turn a town inside out like an old vest? Paris may send us as many spies as it likes, Plassans will stay royalist. What about little Péqueur? We didn't take two bites at him. What fools people must be if they think that mysterious persons go round the provinces offering places as bribes. I should very much like to see one of these gentlemen, I must say."

He was getting angry. Monsieur Maffre was disturbed and felt that he must defend himself.

"Excuse me, I did not say that Abbé Faujas was a Bonapartist agent. On the contrary, I thought the suggestion absurd."

"But we're not talking now about Abbé Faujas; I mean generally speaking. People aren't for sale like that, confound it. Abbé Faujas is above all suspicion."

Silence fell. Monsieur de Bourdeu was finishing off his face in the sand by the addition of a long pointed beard.

"Abbé Faujas has no political opinions," he said in his dry voice.

"True," Monsieur Rastoil replied. "We used to complain of his indifference, but today I approve of his attitude. With all this gossip going on, religion would be dragged in. You know him as well as I do, Bourdeu, he can't be accused of anything underhand whatsoever. When has he ever been seen at Government House? He has stayed honourably in his place. Why, if he was a Bonapartist, he couldn't hide the fact."

"Of course not."

"Furthermore, his life is exemplary. My wife and son have told me things about his way of life which quite moved me."

At this moment, the laughter in the lane grew much louder. Abbé Faujas' voice could be heard rising, congratulating Mademoiselle Aurélie on a really remarkable stroke. Monsieur Rastoil, who had broken off, continued with a smile:

"Do you hear? What makes them all so merry? It makes one wish one was young."

Then, speaking gravely, he added:

"Yes, my wife and my son have made me like Abbé Faujas. We greatly regret that discretion prevents him from joining with us."

Monsieur de Bourdeu was nodding his approval, when cheers rose in the lane. There was quite a hubbub—feet stamping, laughing, shouting—a great outburst of gaiety suggesting break-time at school. Monsieur Rastoil got up from his rustic chair, saying good-naturedly:

"Well! let's go and see. My legs are beginning to itch."

The two others followed him. All three paused at the little doorway. It was the first time that the presiding magistrate and the ex-prefect had ventured so far. When they saw the company from Government House standing in a group at the end of the lane, their faces became solemn. Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies in his turn drew himself up, adopted an official attitude; meanwhile, laughing and laughing, Madame de Condamin was gliding along the walls, filling the lane with the rustlings of her pink and grey frock. The two groups cast sidelong glances at each other, neither wishing to give way; and there between them was Abbé Faujas, still standing in the Mourets' doorway, with his breviary tucked under his arm, gently enjoying the sport, without appearing to be in the least aware of this ticklish situation.

Meanwhile, all the onlookers were holding their breath. Abbé Surin, seeing his public growing, wanted to court applause by a final display of skill. He began devising difficulties for himself, turned his back, played without seeing the shuttlecock, using something like guesswork, sending it back over his head to Mademoiselle Aurélie with mathematical precision. He was flushed and perspiring, his hair was all ruffled; his hands had now slewed right round and were flapping over his right shoulder. But he was still victorious and laughing, as charming as ever. The two groups of onlookers were getting too enthusiastic, so Madame de Condamin began controlling the applause, which was breaking out too soon, with waves of her lace handkerchief. Then the young priest went one further, began taking little leaps to right and left, planning them so as to take Aurélie's shots from a new position every time. This was his grand final display. He began pressing the pace when suddenly, as he jumped, his foot gave way. He almost fell into Madame de Condamin's bosom; she had to put out her arms with a loud scream. The onlookers, thinking that he was hurt, dashed forward, but the player staggered, dropped to his hands and knees, then made a

wonderful leap of a recovery, got to the shuttlecock, returned it to Aurélie before it had touched the ground. With racquet on high, he triumphed.

"Bravo! bravo!" cried Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, stepping forward.

"Bravo! splendid shot!" repeated Monsieur Rastoil, advancing too.

The game was interrupted. The two groups were filling the lane; they were mixing, surrounding Abbé Surin, who stood there and panted, leaning against the wall just beside Abbé Faujas. Everybody was talking at once.

"I thought he had cracked his head open," Dr. Porquier was saying excitedly to Monsieur Maffre.

"You know, these games always end badly," muttered Monsieur de Bourdeu, speaking to Monsieur Delangre, accepting at the same time a handshake from Monsieur de Condamin, whom he avoided in the streets to escape greeting him.

Madame de Condamin was going from the sub-prefect to the presiding magistrate, bringing them together as she kept saying:

"Goodness, I feel worse than he does! I thought both of us were going to fall. You saw, didn't you, it was a large stone."

"There it is, look," said Monsieur Rastoil; "his heel must have stumbled on it."

"This round one, d'you think?" asked Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, as he picked up the pebble.

Outside official ceremonies, they had never spoken a word to each other before. Both began examining the stone; they passed it to each other, remarking that it was sharp and could have cut into the sole of the priest's boot. Madame de Condamin, between them, was smiling at them, assuring them that she was beginning to feel better.

"Abbé Surin's feeling faint!" cried the Rastoil girls.

Sure enough, hearing of the danger he had risked, the young priest had turned very pale. He was going limp. Abbé Faujas, who had kept in the background, picked him up in his strong arms and carried him into the Mourets' garden, where he sat him down on a chair. Both groups invaded the arbour. There, young Surin fainted right away.

"Rose, water! vinegar!" called Abbé Faujas, dashing off towards the terrace.

Mouret, who had been in the dining-room, appeared at the window; but seeing the crowd at the bottom of the garden, he stepped back as if in alarm; he hid, and did not reappear.

Meanwhile Rose was hurrying up with all kinds of first aid. And as she trotted along, she grumbled:

"If only the mistress was here; she's gone to the seminary to see the laddy. I'm alone, I can't do everything, can I? The master, he wouldn't lift a foot, not him! You could be dying and he wouldn't. . . . He's hiding away in the dining-room, the old sneak. No, he wouldn't even give you a glass of water; he'd let you go right under."

Mumbling all the way, she at last reached Abbé Surin, lying on a seat in a faint.

"Ah, the dear young Jesus!" she said in a motherly pitying voice.

Abbé Surin's eyes were closed: his face under his long fair hair was pale; he was like one of those endearing martyrs that swoon in saintly oleographs. The elder of the Rastoil young ladies was propping up his head which hung back limply, revealing his white and delicate neck. They hurriedly doctored him. Madame de Condamin mopped his temples in little dabs with a piece of linen soaked in diluted vinegar. The two groups meanwhile stood round, waiting anxiously. At last he opened his eyes, but closed them again. He fainted off again twice.

"You quite scared me!" said Dr. Porquier to him politely; he had been holding the priest's hand in his.

The young priest went on sitting there, embarrassed and grateful, assuring everybody that it was nothing. Then he saw that they had opened his cassock and that his neck was bare. He smiled and put on his bands again. And as he was advised to keep quiet, he decided to show how tough he was. Back he went into the lane with the young ladies to finish the game.

Monsieur Rastoil had remained with Abbé Faujas. "It's very nice here," he said to him.

"The air is excellent on this slope," added Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies in his charming way.

The two groups of people were looking with interest at the Mourets' house.

"If the ladies and gentlemen would like to stay a little in the garden," said Rose, "the rector is quite at home here—. One moment; I'll go and bring some chairs."

And in spite of protests, she made three trips. So then, after looking at each other for a moment, the two groups sat down on the chairs, out of politeness. The sub-prefect took a seat on the right of Abbé Faujas, while the presiding judge put himself on his left. The conversation was most friendly.

obligingly whispered, bending down to Marthe, whom she had not recognised.

Marthe turned her face, a face nervously thinned, pale with extraordinary emotion; she did not appear to understand. She seemed to be coming out of a dream-like ecstasy; her eyelids fluttered.

"Well, ladies!" said the priest, opening the confessional door.

Madame de Condamin smilingly rose, obedient to the summons. But now she had been recognised by Marthe, who passed quickly into the chapel, then again dropped to her knees and stayed there, three paces away.

Madame Paloque was very amused; she was hoping that the two women would seize each other by the hair. Marthe must be able to hear every word, for Madame de Condamin's voice was flute-like; she babbled her sins, enlivened the confessional with adorable chattering. At one moment she even gave a laugh, a little smothered laugh which made Marthe lift her ravaged face. And her confession was quickly over. Madame de Condamin was going away when she turned, came back, bent down and again talked to the priest, but without kneeling down.

"That she-devil is just laughing at Madame Mouret and the priest," Madame Paloque said to herself. "She's much too clever to upset *her* life."

At last Madame de Condamin left. Marthe watched her as she walked away, apparently waiting till she had gone. Then she came to the confessional, leaned there with her hands, let herself sink down, bumping the wood heavily with her knees. Madame Paloque came nearer and poked her head forward, but all that she could see was Marthe's dark dress spreading out its folds. For half-an-hour, there was no movement. Once she thought she heard stifled sobs in the quivering silence, broken now and then by a sudden creak from the confessional. This spying was getting tedious; she was only staying on to take a look at Marthe as she left.

Abbé Faujas was the first to leave the confessional, and closed his door with an impatient hand. Madame Mouret stayed on much longer, quite still on her knees in the narrow compartment. When she came out with her veil down, she seemed shattered. She forgot to cross herself.

"There's been a tiff, the 'priest wasn't nice," murmured the watcher as she followed behind Marthe into Archbishop's Court. There she stopped, hesitated a moment; after making sure that no

one was watching her, she discreetly slipped into the house occupied by Abbé Fenil in one of the corners of the court.

Marthe was now spending most of her life at the cathedral. She carried out her religious duties with great fervour. Even Abbé Faujas scolded her often about the emotional intensity she put into her worship. He only allowed her to communicate once a month, controlled the hours she spent in religious practice, and insisted that she should not become too engrossed in her devotions. She had to beg him for quite a time before he would allow her to come to low mass every morning. One day when she told him that she had lain for an hour on the cold tiled floor of her bedroom to punish herself for a fault, he became angry and told her that only the confessor had the right to impose penitence. He was stern and harsh with her, threatened to send her back to Abbé Bourrette if she did not humble herself.

"I was wrong to accept you," he often said; "I only want obedient hearts."

She was happy under these blows. This iron hand bowing her down, checking her at the brink of continual worship, in which she would so gladly have plunged, lashed her on to ever fresh desire. She remained the neophyte, descending by slow degrees into love, only to be arrested, guessing at depths beyond, feeling all the delight of this slow journey towards joys she had yet to know. The feeling of deep restfulness that she had experienced at first in church, forgetfulness of the world outside and her own self, was changing now to an active enjoyment, a happiness that she could call forth, that she touched. It was the happiness vaguely longed for ever since her childhood, which she was finding now at forty—a happiness that sufficed, that flowed into the sweet dead years, made her live an egotist, busy with all these new sensations waking in her like caresses.

"Be kind," she murmured to Abbé Faujas; "be kind, for I need kindness."

And when he was kind to her, she could have thanked him on bended knees. He would become very understanding then and talk in a fatherly way to her, explain that she had an over-lively imagination. God, he said, did not like to be worshipped in this impulsive way. She would smile then, become young again, and beautiful, and blushing. She promised to be sensible. But then, in some dark corner of the cathedral, she would have acts of faith that crushed her down to the stone floor; she would prostrate herself on her knees,

slipping down, sitting almost on the ground, uttering broken burning words; and when the words died away her prayer went on in an outpouring of her whole being, calling for that divine kiss that hovered over her hair, but never alighted there.

In the house, Marthe became quarrelsome. So far she had moved about, indifferent, listless, happy whenever her husband left her in peace. But now that he was spending his days at home without using his taunting tongue, just turning thinner and yellow, he made her lose patience.

"He's always getting in our way," she said to the cook.

"Eh, it's just his nastiness," the cook would answer. "At heart, he's not good. And I haven't waited till today to see it. It's like that sulky manner of his, such a talker as he was too; what is it but playing to get our pity? He's mad on his sulking, but he holds to it to be pitied and to have his own way with us. No, madame, you're dead right not to pay attention to all this mock-moping."

Mouret kept his hold on the two women through money. He didn't want any arguments because he couldn't face storms now. So though he had given up scolding and fussing, he still could foster his sulky moods by refusing Marthe or Rose a five-franc piece. He allowed the cook a hundred francs a month for food; wine, oil and preserves they already had in the house. But even so the cook could only just eke out the month, if she wasn't to dip into her own purse. As for Marthe, she had nothing; he left her absolutely penniless. She was reduced to arranging with Rose, trying to scrape ten francs out of the hundred francs allowance. Often she had no boots to wear. She was forced to go to her mother to borrow money for a dress or hat.

"But Mouret's going crazy!" Madame Rougon exclaimed. "You can't go about with nothing on. I'll talk to him."

"Please, please, mother, don't do any such thing," Marthe would answer. "He hates you. He would treat me worse than ever if he knew I was telling you things."

She shed tears and added:

"For a long time I defended him, but now I haven't the strength to keep silent. You remember how he wouldn't even let me set foot in the street. He kept me shut in, treated me like a chattel. But now the reason he's so mean is that he realises I've escaped from his clutches, and will never be his servant again. He's a man without religion, an egotist, bad at heart."

"He's not beating you, though?"

"No, but it will come. At present he just refuses me everything. I haven't bought any chemises for five years. Yesterday I showed him the ones I have: they're worn out and so full of mends that I'm ashamed to wear them. He looked at them, felt them and said they could easily last another year. I haven't got a farthing of my own; I have to cry to get a franc piece. The other day I had to borrow a penny from Rose to buy thread. I sewed up some gloves which were going in every seam."

She gave many other details: the stitches she herself put in her boots with waxed thread; the ribbons she washed in tea to freshen up her hats; the ink she used on the threadbare pleats in her only silk dress, to hide the wear. Madame Rougon pitied her, urged her to rebel. Mouret was a monster. He was pushing meanness to such a point, Rose declared, that he was counting the pears in the attic and the lumps of sugar in the cupboard, watching the preserves, and himself eating last night's crusts.

Marthe's especial grievance was that she couldn't give to the collections in St. Saturnin; she used to hide sixpences in bits of paper, hoard them precious for high mass on Sundays. And now, when the lady patrons of the hospice made some offering to the cathedral—a ciborium or silver cross or banner, she was filled with shame; she had to avoid them, pretend she had not heard of their plan. The ladies were very sorry for her. She would have stolen from her husband if she could have found the key to the desk, for she longed to help in adorning the cathedral that she loved. The jealousy of a deceived wife gripped her entrails when Abbé Faujas used a cup given by Madame de Condamin. But on days when he said mass on the altar-cloth which she had embroidered, she felt deep joy and quivered as she prayed, as if something of herself lay under the priest's outspread hands. She would have liked a whole chapel to belong to her entirely; she dreamed of spending a fortune upon it, of receiving God in her own place, for herself alone.

Rose, to whom she unburdened herself, began devising ways to get money together for her. That year she smuggled away the best fruit in the garden and sold it; she also disposed of a quantity of old furniture up in the attic, and finally managed to accumulate a sum of three hundred francs. This she handed over to Marthe in triumph. Marthe hugged the old cook in her pleasure.

"Ah, how good you are!" she said. "Are you quite sure he noticed nothing? I was looking the other day in the shops in Goldsmiths Street. There are little altar-cruets there in chased silver, so pretty

They cost two hundred francs. You'll do me a favour, won't you? I don't want to buy them myself because I might be seen going in. Tell your sister to go and get them; she can bring them when it's dark and pass them in through your kitchen window."

The buying of these cruets was just like a secret intrigue for her, and gave her the keenest pleasure. She kept them for three days at the back of a cupboard, hidden behind piles of linen; and when she gave them to Abbé Faujas in the vestry of St. Saturnin she trembled and stammered. He scolded her amiably. He didn't like gifts; he talked of silver with the disdain of a strong man, whose mind dwells on instruments of power and domination. During his first two years of poverty, even on days when he and his mother lived on bread and water, he had never dreamt of borrowing ten francs from the Mourets.

Marthe found a safe hiding-place for the remaining hundred francs. She too was getting tight-fisted; she was thinking how she would lay them out, each morning thought of some new thing to buy. And while she was still very undecided, Rose told her that Madame Trouche wanted a word with her in private. Olympe used to spend hours in the kitchen and had become a close friend of Rose. She often used to borrow a couple of francs from her to avoid climbing two flights of stairs on days when she said she had forgotten her purse.

"Go up and see her," said the cook. "You can talk better up there. They're a decent sort, and very fond of the rector. They've had their pack of trouble, I can tell you. It's heartbreaking, all that Madame Olympe's been telling me."

Marthe found Olympe in tears. They were too good; people had always taken advantage of them; and she then plunged into details about their affairs at Besançon, where the villainy of a partner had left them loaded with heavy debts. And the worst was that the creditors were getting angry. She had just received an insulting letter, in which they threatened to write to the mayor and the bishop of Plassans.

"I'm ready to face anything myself," she added, sobbing, "but I'd give my life to keep my brother out of this. He's already done too much for us; I don't want to say a word to him, because he isn't rich, and he would worry and that wouldn't help. Heavens! how can this man be stopped from writing? It would be a dying shame if a letter like that reaches the Town Hall and the palace. Yes, I know my brother, it would be the death of him."

At this news, tears also came into Marthe's eyes. She turned very

white, she took Olympe's hands in her own. And then, though Olympe had asked for nothing, she offered her the hundred francs.

"It's very little, of course, but perhaps it could stave off the danger?" she asked anxiously.

"A hundred francs, a hundred francs," Olympe repeated. "No, no, he'd never be satisfied with a hundred francs."

Marthe was in despair. She protested that she had no more. She was foolish enough to mention the altar-cruets. If she hadn't bought them, she could have given the three hundred francs. Madame Trouche's eyes had already lit up.

"Three hundred francs is exactly what he's asking," she said. "Yes, you'd be helping my brother far more if you didn't give him this present, which would be going to the cathedral anyway. All sorts of fine things were brought to him by the ladies at Besançon too, but he's no better off today. Don't give any more; it's just robbery. Consult me. There's so much hidden poverty! No, a hundred francs would never do."

After a long half-hour of this wailing, she saw that Marthe really only had a hundred francs, and ended by accepting them.

"I'll send them to this man to keep him quiet for a bit," she said, "but he won't leave us in peace very long. And above all, please, not one word about this to my brother; you'd be the death of him. It would also be just as well if my husband knew nothing about our little affairs. He's got such pride that he would do something silly just to get straight with you. But women understand one another, don't they?"

Marthe was very happy about this loan: from now on she had something new to think about: protecting Abbé Faujas from the danger that threatened him, without letting him know a word. She often went upstairs now, spent hours with Olympe discussing ways of paying off the debts. Olympe told her that a good many outstanding bills had been endorsed by the priest, and there would be a dreadful scandal if these bills ever reached the hands of some bailiff in Plassans. The total amount of these debts, she said, was so heavy that for a long time she refused to name it and only wept louder when Marthe pressed her to tell. But then at last one day she mentioned the sum of twenty thousand francs. Marthe was petrified. Never, never could she find such a sum. With eyes set, she said she thought it would be necessary to wait till Mouret died, to make such a sum available. Olympe was made uneasy by Marthe's grave face.

"I say twenty thousand francs in all," she hastened to add, "but

we would be very glad if we could pay them off in ten years by small instalments. The creditors would wait as long as one liked, provided they could count on regular payments. It's very annoying that we can't find someone to trust us and make the few necessary advances."

This was the usual subject of their conversation. Olympe often talked too about Abbé Faujas. She seemed to adore him. She gave Marthe intimate details about the priest: he couldn't bear tickles; he couldn't sleep on the left side; he had a strawberry mark on the right shoulder which turned red in May, just like a natural fruit. Marthe listened and smiled, and never wearied of such details. She asked the young woman about her childhood, and her brother's. Then, when the talk came back to money, her helplessness almost made her wild. She allowed herself to complain bitterly of Mouret, and Olympe, waxing bold, at last only referred to him as 'the old skinflint'. Sometimes when Trouche came in from his office the women were still there talking; they used to stop, change the subject. Trouche remained dignified. The lady patrons of the Hospice of the Virgin were very pleased with him. He was never seen in any café in the town.

There were days when Olympe talked of throwing herself out of the window. Marthe, in her anxiety to help, induced Rose to take every old useless thing lying about to a second-hand dealer in the market. At first the two women were cautious: they only removed (when Mouret was out) chairs and rickety tables. Then they laid hands on more important things, sold pieces of china, jewels, anything that could go without leaving too obvious a gap. They were on a slippery slope, they would have begun disposing of the larger pieces of furniture and left nothing but four bare walls if Mouret one day hadn't called Rose a thief and threatened to take her to the police.

"A thief, sir! Me!" she cried. "Mind what you're saying. Just because you saw me selling one of the mistress's rings. But it was mine, I tell you. The mistress gave it me; the mistress isn't a stingy cat like yourself. Aren't you ashamed to leave your poor wife without a penny? She hasn't got the boots to put on her feet. The other day I paid the milkwoman. Well, yes! I did sell her ring. And isn't her ring her own property? She has a perfect right to turn it into money since you won't let her have anything. I would sell up the house, do you hear? The whole house. It grieves me too much to see her going about as bare as St. John."

Mouret now began an hourly watch; he kept the cupboards shut

and held the keys. When Rose was going out, he used to look at her hands suspiciously; he felt her pockets, if he saw a tell-tale bulge under her skirt. He bought back certain things from the market dealer and restored them where they belonged, dusting them and tending them pointedly in the presence of Marthe, to remind her of what he called "Rose's robberies". Never did he implicate her openly. He plagued her especially over a certain flagon of cut glass, which had been sold by the cook for one franc. And Rose, who pretended that she had broken it, had to bring it to him at table at every meal. One morning at lunch, in exasperation, she dropped it in front of him.

"And now, monsieur, it is broken, isn't it?" she said, laughing in his face. And as he was about to give her notice: "You just try! Twenty-five years I've been in your service, monsieur. I wouldn't leave alone. The mistress would come with me."

Marthe, driven to extremes, urged on by Rose and Olympe, revolted at last. There were five hundred francs that she absolutely must have. For a whole week Olympe had been sobbing and pretending that, if she didn't have five hundred francs by the end of the month, one of the bills endorsed by Abbé Faujas 'was going to be made public in one of the Plassans newspapers'. The bill to be made public, this frightful menace which she didn't understand quite clearly, terrified Marthe and made her decide to dare all. That night, as she went to bed, she asked Mouret for the five hundred francs. And as he looked at her in utter amazement, she talked of her fifteen years of self-sacrifice, of the fifteen years that she had spent behind a counter in Marseilles, with a pen in her ear like a clerk.

"We earned that money together," she said; "it belongs to both of us. I want five hundred francs."

Mouret burst out of his silence with the utmost violence. All his voluble temper suddenly re-emerged.

"Five hundred francs!" he shouted. "For your priest, is it? If I've been playing stupid and mum, keeping my tongue to myself these days, it's because there was far too much to say. But don't think that you're going to have it on me right to the end. Five hundred francs! Why not the house? It's true the house is his. So he wants the money, does he? He told you to ask me for the money? When I think that here I am in my own house as if I was in a robbers' wood! They'll end by stealing the handkerchief out of my pocket. I bet that if I went up and searched his room, I'd find all my poor belongings at the back of his drawers. I'm short of three pairs of pants, seven

pairs of socks, four or five shirts; I counted up yesterday. I've got nothing left; everything's going, vanish! No, not one farthing, not a farthing, do you hear!"

"I want five hundred francs: half the money's mine," she repeated calmly:

For an hour Mouret stormed, goading himself on, till he tired with shouting the same reproaches twenty times. He hardly recognised his wife; before the priest came, she used to love him, listen to him, put the house first. The people pushing her on against him must be a pretty bad lot. At last, his voice quavered. He sank into an armchair, exhausted, weak as a babe.

"Will you give me the key of the desk?" asked Marthe.

He got up, put all the strength he had left into one last cry:

"You want to take everything, eh? Leave the children to lie on straw, not even save a crust of bread? All right then, take the lot! Call Rose, let her fill her apron. Here, have the key."

He threw her the key. Marthe hid it under her pillow. She was quite white after this quarrel, the first violent quarrel she had ever had with her husband. She went to bed; he spent the night in the armchair. In the early morning she heard him sobbing. She would have given him back the key, if he hadn't rushed down into the garden like a madman, although it was still pitch dark.

Peace seemed to be restored. The key of the desk remained hanging on a nail near the mirror. Marthe, not used to seeing very large lump sums, felt timid about the money. At first she was very discreet, ashamed even, every time she opened the drawer, where Mouret always kept some ten thousand francs in cash for his deals in wine. She only took what she strictly needed. Olympe, moreover, gave her excellent advice: as she had the key now she must show herself to be economical. Indeed, when she saw Marthe all of a tremble at the sight of the "hoard", she even dropped the subject of the Besançon debts for a time.

Mouret relapsed into gloomy silence. He had now received a fresh blow, heavier than the first, when Serge entered the seminary. His friends on Sauvaille Place, the little retired men who went there regularly for an afternoon stroll between four and six, began to be seriously uneasy when they saw Mouret coming along with arms dangling and a stupefied air; he hardly answered their questions, as though he was afflicted with some incurable disease.

"He's failing, he's failing," they murmured. "And only forty-four years of age; it's incredible. He'll be going off his head."

He didn't seem to take in the hints they slyly dropped. When asked a straight question about Abbé Faujas, he would blush slightly and reply that he was a good tenant, that he paid his rent very regularly. When his back was turned, his retired friends laughed at him as they sat on their bench sunning themselves in the Place.

"He's only got what he deserves, after all," said an old almshouse dealer. "You remember how keen he was on the rector. He was the chap who used to sing his praises all over Plassans. Today, when you set him talking on the same subject, he looks pretty queer."

The cronies then repeated various scandalous tales which they passed on from ear to ear down the bench.

"Well at any rate, Mouret's got his tail between his legs now," said an old tanner, lowering his voice: "I'd turn the rector out of his house."

And every one agreed that Mouret, who was always so ready to laugh at husbands bossed by their wives, had got his tail between his legs.

In the town, this slanderous talk about the priest (though as a people seemed very persistent in spreading it) never got beyond the world of idlers and gossips. If Abbé Faujas had declined the rector's office and remained at the Mourets', it could not have been said himself, because of his affection for the place, that he read his breviary so peacefully. His lofty piety, his disdain of the dalliance indulged in by priests, his absolute suspicion. The members of the Youth Club, who were always trying to bring about his downfall. The whole of the town, besides, was with him. Only the St. Mark quarter was against him now; the aristocracy living there maintained their aloofness when they met him in his lordship's rooms. But even the old Madame Rougon told him that he was not to be trusted. Forward, he used to shake his head.

"Nothing is safe and sound yet," he would say, "I can't hold on anyone. A mere straw would bring me down."

Marthe had been disturbing the peace of the town. She allayed the feverish devotion that consumed the people. She eluded him, was disobedient, even to her father. She could be so useful, the lady, that she was sure to prove his undoing. There was no doubt about it. She was destroying her figure, dulling her senses. She was like some growing disease.

reaching nearer and nearer to the brain and heart. Her face suffused with ecstasy, her hands reached out with nervous trembling. A dry cough sometimes shook her from head to foot, yet she did not seem to notice how it racked her. Then he became sterner still, repelled the love she proffered, forbade her to come at all to St. Saturnin.

"The cathedral is icy cold," he said; "you are coughing too much. I do not want you to make yourself worse."

She assured him that it was nothing, a mere throat irritation. And then she would give way, accept his order not to come to church, like some deserved punishment which closed the door of heaven to her. She would sob, think herself damned, loiter listlessly through empty days. And then, in spite of herself, like a woman hankering after forbidden love, when Fridays came, she would go and humbly glide into the St. Michael chapel, rest her burning forehead against the cool wood of the confessional. She did not speak, she just stayed there, prostrated, while Abbé Faujas in annoyance treated her harshly as an unworthy daughter, and sent her away. So then she would leave, happy and soothed.

The priest feared the effect of the gloom in the St. Michael chapel. Dr. Porquier was asked to intervene, and he persuaded Marthe to attend confession in the little oratory at the Hospice of the Virgin in the suburbs. Abbé Faujas promised to be there once a fortnight on Saturdays. This oratory was in a large whitewashed room with four tall windows, and he hoped that its brightness would calm the over-excited imagination of his penitent. There he could dominate her, make her a submissive slave without any fear of possible scandal. But in addition he made his mother come with Marthe, to silence any evil gossip. And while he heard Marthe's confession, Madame Faujas was to stay outside the door. The old lady didn't like wasting her time, so she brought a stocking to knit. Often as they returned together to Balande Street, she used to say to Marthe:

"My dear, I heard Ovid talking very loud again today. Can't you content him, then? Don't you love him? Ah, how I would like to be in your place, and kiss his feet! I shall begin to hate you, if you can't do anything but vex him."

Marthe bent her head. She felt utterly abashed at these words of Madame Faujas. She didn't like her and was jealous of her, finding her always between herself and the priest. Besides, she didn't feel at all happy about those dark looks which the old lady continually gave her, looks that seemed to suggest strange and disturbing encouragement.

Marthe's poor state of health sufficed to explain her appointment with Abbé Faujas in the oratory at the Hospice of the Virgin. Dr. Porquier reassured enquirers: she was simply following his professional advice. This news caused loud amusement among the strollers in Sauvaire Place.

"All the same," said Madame Paloque one day to her husband, as she watched Marthe walking down Balande Street with Madame Faujas for company, "I should be very interested to be in a little corner to see what the priest is really up to with his lover. It's absurd of her to talk about her heavy cold! As if a heavy cold prevented one from going to confession in church! I've had colds, but they didn't make me go and hide away in chapels with priests."

"You oughtn't to meddle with the affairs of Abbé Faujas," said the judge. "I've been warned; he's not a man to be trifled with. You're getting too sharp with your tongue: you'll prevent us from getting where we want."

"What?" she replied tartly. "When they've trampled on my body? They've got to reckon with me. Your Abbé Faujas is a great fool. Supposing I caught the rector and his fair one saying sweet nothings, do you think Abbé Fenil wouldn't be grateful? No, such scandal would cost Faujas dear. Leave this to me, you're not the expert here."

A fortnight later, on Saturday morning, Madame Paloque was hiding her gorgon face behind her curtains, waiting to see Marthe leave her house. She was all ready dressed, and had her eye to a hole in the muslin. When the two women had disappeared round the corner of Taravelle Street, she laughed, wide-mouthed. There was no hurry; she put on her gloves, and sauntered off by Government Square, making the grand tour, taking it easy over the cobbled stones. As she went past Madame de Condamin's little mansion, she almost thought of going in to bring her too: but she might have scruples. On the whole, it would be better to do without a witness and make the expedition really thorough.

"I've given them time to get to the worst sins," she thought: "I think I might turn up now, after my quarter of an hour's stroll."

So she quickened her step. She often came to the hospice to see Trouche about matters of accountancy. But that day, instead of going to the clerk's office, she went along the corridor and down the steps at the end, bound straight for the oratory. When she got to the door, there was Madame Faujas quietly knitting on a chair. The judge's wife had foreseen this obstacle; she walked up to the door, with the hurried air of somebody busy. But before she could put her

arm out to touch the handle, the old lady got up and brushed her aside with truly remarkable vigour.

"Where are you going?" she asked, in her rough peasant's voice.

"I'm going where I have business," answered Madame Paloque, whose arm was bruised, and her face quite convulsed with anger.

"You are insolent and rough. Let me pass: I am treasurer to the hospice and have the right to go in anywhere."

Madame Faujas, standing upright against the door, adjusted the spectacles on her nose. She then began knitting again with all the calm in the world.

"No," she said flatly; "you're not going in."

"Oh, and pray why not?"

"Because I don't wish it."

The judge's wife felt that her stratagem had failed. Bile was choking her; she looked frightful. She stammered and said:

"I don't know you, and I don't know what you're doing here. I could call for help and have you arrested, for you struck me. Funny things must be going on inside that door before you could be posted here to stop the people of the house from going in. I belong here, do you understand? Let me pass, or I'll call everyone."

"Call anyone you like," answered the old lady with a shrug of her shoulders. "I said you couldn't go in: I don't wish it—that's plain enough. How do I know that you belong here? And even if you do, it's all the same. No one can go in. That's my business."

With that, Madame Paloque lost all restraint; she raised her voice and cried:

"That's enough. I don't need to go in now. I am sufficiently informed. You are Abbé Faujas' mother, aren't you? Well, it's disgusting! A nice trade you're plying! I'm certainly not going in; I'm not going to meddle with such filth."

Madame Faujas put her knitting down on the chair, then looked at Madame Paloque with eyes gleaming, bending forward a little, her hands out as if to fling herself on the intruder and stop any outcry. She was just about to attack, when the door suddenly opened and Abbé Faujas appeared in the doorway; he was in his surplice and looked stern.

"Well, mother," he asked, "what's going on here?"

The old lady bent her head and moved back, like a watch-dog getting to heel.

"Ah, it's you, dear Madame Paloque!" the priest went on. "Did you want to see me?"

The judge's wife, with supreme self-command, had put a smile on her face. She answered in a dreadfully amiable tone, with mockery:

"What! So it was you in there, rector! Ah, if I had known, I wouldn't have pressed the point. I wanted to have a look at the cloth on our altar, which probably needs attention. You know I'm the good housewife here, I see to small details. But if you're busy, don't let me disturb you. Do please go on, the hospice is yours. One word from Madame Faujas here, and I would have left her to go on watching over your peace."

Madame Faujas allowed a grunt to escape her. One look from her son quietened her.

"Come in, please," Abbé Faujas replied; "you're not disturbing me in the least. I was hearing confession from Madame Mouret, who is a little indisposed. Do come in. You're right about the altar cloth; it might be changed."

"No, no, I'll come back another time," she answered; "I'm so sorry to have disturbed you. Please go on, rector, do."

None the less she stepped in. While she and Marthe looked at the altar-cloth, the priest scolded his mother in a low voice:

"Why did you stop her, mother? I did not tell you to guard the door."

She was staring straight in front of her with her mulish look.

"She would have had to walk over my body to get in," she murmured.

"But why?"

"Because—listen, Ovid, don't get angry; you know it's terrible for me when you get angry. You told me to come here with Madame Mouret, didn't you? Well, I thought you needed me because people might be interested. So I sat myself down here. And I promise you: the two of you were free to do just what you wanted; no one would have poked a nose in."

He understood. Seizing her hands, he shook her and said:

"What, mother, do you mean to say you thought——?"

"I didn't think anything," she answered with sublime indifference. "You're your own master and do what you like; everything you do is well done, see? You're my child. I'd go and steal for you, and that's plain."

But her son was not listening now. He had dropped her hands and was looking at her, as though lost in thoughts which made his face harder and more austere.

"No; never, never," he said with bitter pride. "You're wrong, mother. Only chaste men are strong."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DÉSIRÉE, seventeen now, was still laughing her babyish laugh. She had grown tall and good-looking and was well covered; her figure was fully developed. She was growing like a strong plant, happy to grow, careless of the troubles that were emptying and darkening the house.

"You're not laughing," she used to say to her father. "Would you like to play at skipping? It's such fun!"

She had taken over an entire plot in the garden; she dug there, planted vegetables, watered. Heavy work was her joy. Then she wanted to have hens, and the hens ate her vegetables. So she scolded them with motherly fondness. What with her games in the earth, among her animals, she got terribly dirty.

"The muck she collects!" cried Rose. "No more coming into my kitchen, thank you; she leaves mud all over the place. There now, madame, very good of you to dinkify the girl, I'm sure. If I were you, I'd just let her wallow in it as she pleases."

Marthe, full of her emotional needs, hardly troubled now to see that Désirée changed her things. The child sometimes wore the same chemise for three weeks. Her stockings were out at heel and tumbling over her boots, themselves worn through to the uppers; her petticoats were as deplorable as a beggar-woman's rags. One day Mouret himself had to get a needle; her frock was split right down at the back and showing her skin. And with her hair tumbling over her shoulders, her grimy hands and face all smears, she laughed because she was half bare.

Marthe began to have a feeling of repulsion when she came home from mass with the faint fragrance of incense lingering in her hair; she was offended by the powerful earthy smell that her daughter brought in with her. She used to send her back to the garden as soon as lunch was over; she couldn't bear having the girl beside her;

her robust health, her laughs ringing out at every trifle were a challenge that was too disturbing.

"Heavens! how tiring the child is!" she murmured sometimes, looking strained and listless.

Mouret heard her complaining. "If she's too trying, she can be turned out of the house like the other two," he said, in a moment of anger.

"Upon my word, I should be much easier if she weren't there," she answered straight out.

One afternoon towards the end of summer, Mouret suddenly took alarm at the complete silence of Désirée: only a few minutes before she had been making a frightful noise at the far end of the garden. Running out, he found her lying on the ground beside a ladder. She had climbed into a tree to gather figs and then slipped down. Luckily the box shrubs deadened her fall. Mouret, feeling very scared, picked her up in his arms and called for help. He thought she was dead, but she soon came round, said that she wasn't hurt at all and wanted to climb the ladder again.

Meanwhile Marthe had come out on to the terrace. When she heard Désirée talking again, she lost her temper:

"That child will be the death of me," she said; "all she can think of is to give me frights. I'm sure she threw herself down on purpose. I can't stand it any more. I shall shut myself up in my bedroom, get out of the house in the morning and only come back at night. Yes, laugh away, you big silly! Fancy bringing such a creature into the world! Ah, you'll cost me dear."

"Aye, sure enough," added Rose, who had come running out of her kitchen. "She's a big load on your hands, and there's no danger of finding her a husband, ever."

Mouret was listening, watching; he was struck to the heart, and had no word to say in answer. Leaving them, he went down to the end of the garden and stayed with the girl. And till darkness fell they appeared to be talking gently together. Next day, Marthe and Rose were to be away the whole morning; they were going three miles out of Plassans to hear a mass, in a chapel dedicated to St. January; all the good women-folk of Plassans were going there that day on a pilgrimage. When they returned, Rose hastened to serve a cold lunch. Marthe had been eating for a few minutes when she noticed that her daughter wasn't at table.

"Isn't Désirée hungry, then?" she asked. "Why isn't she having lunch with us?"

"Desirée is no longer here," said Mouret, whose food remained untouched on his plate; "I took her this morning to St. Eutrope, to her nurse."

Marthe laid down her fork; she was a little pale, surprised and hurt.

"You might have asked me," she said.

"She's in a good home; her nurse is a good woman, and very fond of her. She'll be well looked after. So the child won't be a trial to you any more, and everybody will be pleased."

And as she remained silent, Mouret added:

"If the house doesn't seem quiet enough, you tell me, and I'll go away."

She half rose from her chair and her eyes flashed. He had dealt her such a shrewd blow that she put out her hand, as if to throw the wine bottle at his head. In this woman's nature, so long subdued, unknown fires were rising; hatred was growing for this man, ever present to her like remorse. She went on eating quite deliberately, without another word about her daughter. Mouret had folded his napkin; he remained in his chair opposite her, listening to the sound of her fork, and slowly looking round the dining-room, once so merry with the noise of the children, so sad and empty that day. The room seemed icy to him. Tears were coming to his eyes when Marthe called to Rose for the dessert.

"You're hungry, aren't you, madame?" said the cook as she brought in a plateful of fruit. "That's because we had such a fine long walk. If master had come with us instead of playing the pagan, he wouldn't have let you finish off the mutton by yourself."

She changed the plates, chattering on:

"The chapel of St. January is very pretty, but it's too small. You saw those ladies who arrived late? They had to kneel outside on the grass in the full sun. What beats me is that Madame de Condamin came in a carriage; there's no point in a pilgrimage if you come like that. Ah, we spent a good morning, didn't we, madame?"

"Yes, a good morning," echoed Marthe. "Abbé Mousseau preached a very moving sermon."

Now it was Rose's turn to notice that Désirée wasn't there; learning that the child had gone, she cried:

"Pon my word, that's a good idea of master's! She was always taking my saucepans to water her salads. We shall fetch our breath more easily now."

"Yes indeed," said Marthe, as she peeled a pear.

Mouret was choking. He left the dining-room without ~~entering~~ to Rose, who called that the coffee was nearly ready. ~~Marthe, left~~ alone in the dining-room, calmly finished her pear.

When the cook brought the coffee in, Madame Faujas happened to be coming downstairs.

"Come in, now," said Rose. "You can keep the mistress company and have the master's cup. He's just gone out all crazy like."

The old lady sat down in Mouret's place.

"I thought you never took coffee," she remarked, as she helped herself to sugar.

"Oh yes, before, that was so," said Rose, "when master kept the purse. But the mistress would be very foolish to deprive herself now of what she likes."

They talked for a good hour. Marthe was moved to tell her woes to Madame Faujas: her husband had just made a frightful scene over her daughter; acting on a sudden impulse, he had taken her away to her nurse. She defended herself, protesting that she was very fond of the child, that she would go and bring her back one day.

"She was a bit noisy," suggested Madame Faujas. "I was sorry for you many a time. If she had stayed my son would have stopped coming down to read his breviary in the garden; she distracted him."

From this day on, Marthe and her husband ate their meals in silence. The autumn was very damp; the dining-room remained depressing, with its two places laid wide apart at the far ends of the big table. Shadows filled the corners, cold descended from the ceiling. It was like a burial, as Rose put it.

"Ah well," she often said as she brought in the dishes, "we oughtn't to make such a noise. At this rate, there's no danger of scraping the skin off your tongues. Now cheer up a bit, master; you look as though you were following a coffin. You'll end by making the mistress take to her bed. It's bad for the health to eat and not talk."

When the cold weather set in, Rose, being anxious to oblige Madame Faujas, offered her the use of her oven for cooking. First it was kettles of water which the old lady brought down for heating: she had no fire and her son was in a hurry to shave. Next she borrowed irons, used a few saucepans, asked for the dutch oven to roast a leg of mutton; and then, as she hadn't a suitable fire-place upstairs, she finally accepted the offer made by Rose, who proceeded to light a fire of vine-stalks fit to roast a whole sheep.

"Now make yourself at home," she used to say, turning the mutton on the spit herself; "the kitchen's large, isn't it? Plenty of room for two. I don't know how you've managed up to now, doing your cooking on the floor at your bedroom fire-place in a nasty tin oven. I should have been afraid of apoplexy. And Monsieur Mouret is ridiculous; rooms aren't let with no kitchen. You must be very good sorts, not at all stuck up, just taking life as it comes."

Little by little, Madame Faujas took to cooking her lunch and dinner in the Mourets' kitchen. To begin with, she supplied her own coal, oil and spices. Eventually, if she forgot any stores, the cook wouldn't let her go upstairs for them; she insisted on her taking what she needed out of the cupboard.

"Look, there's the butter. It's not the bit you'll take on the end of your knife that will ruin us. You know very well you can help yourself to anything here. The mistress would scold me if you didn't make yourself comfortable."

In this way Rose and Madame Faujas became very intimate with each other; the cook was delighted to have someone always there, ready to listen while she stirred her sauces. And she got on wonderfully well with the priest's old mother; her print dress, her rugged face and rough common ways put them almost on equal footing. For hours they used to loiter on together when ovens were out. Madame Faujas soon took over complete control in the kitchen. But she kept her impenetrable guard: only said what she meant to say, and had herself told what she wanted to know. She it was who decided what the Mourets were to have for dinner, and tasted the dishes she sent in to them before they did; and often Rose even used to prepare dainties separately, specially meant for the priest: caramel apples, rice cakes, soufflé fritters. The food supplies got mixed, saucepans were all over the place, the two dinners interchanged to such an extent that when they were dishing up the cook used to exclaim with a laugh:

"Tell me, madame, are the fried eggs for you? I just can't remember. Faith, it would be simpler to eat together!"

It was All Saints Day when the priest lunched for the first time in the Mourets' dining-room. He was in a hurry; he had to get back to St. Saturnin. So to save him time, Marthe made him sit at the table, saying that in this way his mother wouldn't have to climb two flights of stairs. A week later the custom was established; the Faujas came down for every meal, sat down to table and went right through to coffee. During the first days, cooking still remained

separate, but Rose thought this "a very stupid plan", and said she could perfectly well manage the cooking for four and would arrange it all with Madame Faujas.

"Don't thank me," she added. "It's you who are kind, coming down to keep the mistress company; you'll bring a bit of cheerfulness. I've hardly had the heart lately to go into the dining-room; it seemed as though I was going into a dead man's room. The emptiness was awful. And if the master sulks now, that's his look-out; he can sulk by himself."

The stove roared; the room was snug and warm. It was a delightful winter. Never had Rose set cleaner cloth on table; the rector's chair she used to set near the stove so that he could sit with his back to the fire. She was very particular about his knife, his fork and his glass; and if ever the table-cloth had the least little mark, she was careful to see that it didn't come at his place. And there were dozens of thoughtful little attentions besides. When she had one of his favourite dishes coming, she used to give him warning to save up his appetite. At other times she gave him a surprise by bringing in the dish covered over; she would laugh furtively at the curious eyes and say, with an air of modest triumph:

"It's for the rector, a scoter-duck stuffed with olives, as he likes them done. You'll give the rector a fillet, madame, won't you? The dish is for him."

Marthe did the helping. She insisted, with imploring eyes, that he should have the tit-bits. She always helped him first, going round the dish while Rose bent over her, pointing with her finger to what she thought the best. And they even had little tiffs about the rival merits of this or that part of a chicken or rabbit. Rose used to push a tapestry cushion under the rector's feet. Marthe was careful that he had his bottle of Bordeaux and his roll, a golden-crusted roll that she ordered daily from the baker.

"Eh, nothing can be too good," Rose used to say when the priest was thanking them. "Who would live well, now, if brave hearts like you weren't happy and comfortable? Just leave things to us, the good Father will pay your debt."

Madame Faujas, who sat facing her son, used to smile at all this petting. She was beginning to be fond of Marthe and Rose; their adoration indeed she found but natural, and she looked upon them as fortunate to be kneeling like this before her god. Herself she ate slowly and well, like a peasant-woman with her work cut out. And she it was, with her solid square head, who really presided at meals.

missing not one forkful, seeing that Marthe kept to her rôle as helper, gloating over her son with well-satisfied pleasure. If she spoke, it was only three words, to explain the priest's tastes or to cut short the polite refusals that he still ventured to make. Sometimes she would shrug her shoulders, give his foot a nudge with her own. Wasn't the table his? He could clear the whole dish if that was his pleasure; the others could rest content with a bite of dry bread and sit and look at him.

As for Abbé Faujas, he often remained indifferent to the fond care he received. He was frugal, a fast eater, and his mind was busy elsewhere; often he did not notice the dainty bits that fell to his share. It was in answer to his mother's entreaties that he had agreed to join the Mourets for meals. What he appreciated in this ground-floor dining-room was simply the pleasure of being entirely free from material cares. So he maintained a splendid calm, gradually became accustomed to see his smallest desires anticipated, forgetting at last to express surprise or thanks, reigning disdainfully between the mistress of the house and the cook, who anxiously watched for the shadow of a frown on his serious face.

And Mouret, sitting opposite his wife, was forgotten. He sat up like a child, with his wrists resting on the edge of the table, waiting till Marthe would condescend to think of him. She helped him last, as things came, and sparingly. Rose, standing behind her, used to warn her when she happened to pick on a tit-bit by mistake.

"No, no, not that bit. You know that master likes the head; he sucks the little bones."

Mouret, all authority abated, looked shamefaced, and ate like a hanger-on. He could feel Madame Faujas looking at him when he cut himself bread. He thought for quite a minute, with his eyes on the bottle, before he ventured to help himself to wine. Once, by mistake, he took a little half-glass of the rector's Bordeaux. A nice business indeed! For a month Rose couldn't forget that half-glass of wine. And when she produced a sweet, she used to exclaim:

"I don't want the master to taste it. He's never praised my cooking. Once he told me my rum omelette was burnt. So then I told him: 'They shall always be burnt for you.' Do you hear, madame, none for the master."

And she had petty inventions too. She used to hand him cracked plates, arrange his seat at a table leg, leave cloth hairs in his glass, put bread and wine and salt at the other end of the table. Mouret was the only one who liked mustard; he used to go to the grocer's

himself to buy pots, which the cook as regularly spirited away on the pretext that "they stank". Going without mustard was quite enough to spoil his meals. What upset him even more and took his appetite away completely, was being driven out of his own seat, the seat that he had always occupied by the window, and now allotted as the pleasantest to the priest. So now he sat facing the door and seemed to be eating in a house with strangers, not his own, because he could no longer glance out at his fruit-trees with every mouthful he took.

Marthe wasn't spiteful like Rose; she treated him as a poor relation that one tolerates. In the end she ignored his presence, hardly ever gave him a word, behaving as though Abbé Faujas were the only person to give orders in the house. And Mouret never broke out; he exchanged a few words of politeness with the priest, ate in silence, answered the cook's attacks with slow looks. Then, as he always finished first, he used to fold up his napkin methodically and withdraw, often before dessert.

Rose said that he was raging really. When she chatted with Madame Faujas in the kitchen, she explained at great length about her master:

"I know him all right; he's never really scared me. Before you came here, the mistress used to tremble before him, because he was always bawling and playing the tyrant. And what a bugbear he was to us all: always at you, always finding fault, poking his nose in everywhere, always wanting to show who was master. And look at him now: meek as a sheep, isn't he? That's because the mistress got the upper hand. Ah, if he was brave enough, if he wasn't afraid of a pack of trouble, you'd hear a pretty tune! But he's too scared of your son; yes, he's scared of the rector. You know, there are times when you'd think he was going soft in the head. But after all, since he's no longer a nuisance to us, he can be as he likes, can't he, madame?"

Madame Faujas used to reply that Monsieur Mouret seemed to her to be a very worthy man; his only fault was that he wasn't religious. But he would certainly come back to the good path later on. And all the time, by slow degrees, the old lady was taking over the ground floor, going from kitchen to dining-room, trotting through the hall and down the corridor. And Mouret, when he encountered her, vividly recalled the day when the Faujas first arrived; he remembered the shabby black dress she wore, the basket she clung to obstinately with both hands, how she poked her head

into every room, calm and cool as a person going over a house put up for sale.

Now that the Faujas were eating on the ground floor, the second floor almost belonged to the Trouches. They were becoming quite noisy there. There were sounds of stamping, of furniture rumbling about; voices came ringing down the stairs from doors that were opened and then violently slammed. Madame Faujas, talking away in the kitchen, would look up uneasily. Rose, to smooth things over, said that poor Madame Trouche was having a lot of trouble. One night the priest, who had not yet gone to bed, heard strange noises on the stairs. Coming out with a candle, he saw Trouche climbing up the steps on his knees; he was abominably drunk. He lifted him in his sturdy arms, and dumped him into his room. Olympe was in bed, calmly reading a novel, taking sips from a glass of toddy on the bed-table.

"Listen," said Abbé Faujas, livid with anger, "tomorrow you pack and go."

"Oh, and why?" asked Olympe, quite unperturbed. "We're comfortable here."

But the priest interrupted her roughly.

"Be quiet! You miserable creature, you've always tried to do me harm. Mother was right; I should never have helped you out of your poverty. And now I'm called on to pick up your husband on the staircase. It's a disgrace. And think of the scandal if he was seen in this state. You're going tomorrow."

Olympe had sat up to drink a good mouthful of toddy.

"Ah no, indeed we're not," she said.

Trouche was laughing. He was cheerfully drunk. He had flopped into an armchair, beaming ecstatically.

"Now, d-don't let's be angry," he said. "It's nothing: just a bit dizzy—it's the air—very keen tonight. And then the streets are so f-funny in this damned town! I'm telling you, Faujas, they're quite respectable young men. Dr. Porquier's son is one of 'em. You know Dr. P-Porquier, don't you? Well, we meet in a café, behind the prison. It's k-kept by an Arlesian, handsome bit, dark——"

The priest, standing with arms folded, was glowering at him terribly.

"No, no, Faujas; here, I say, you're wrong to be angry with me. You know I'm well brought up, I know whatsh-what, eh? In the daytime, I wouldn't touch a glass of syrup, for fear of c-compromising you. So ever since I've been here, I go to my office as if I

was trotting to school, with j-jam sandwiches in my little basket; and a fool's job at that. I'm a fool to do it, yes, 'pon my word; and if I wasn't doing you a favour, I'd—— But at night, can I be seen? Not likely. I can use my legs then. Does me good. I'd h-burst if I was always locked up. To start with, there's no one in the streets—— They're so funny——!"

"You drunkard!" said the priest, through clenched teeth.

"You won't make it up? Pity. I'm a good-natured chap, I am; don't like nasty faces. If you don't like it, it's goodbye to you and your nuns. There's only the Condamin one who's pretty, and the Arlesian one is better still. Oh, roll your eyes as much as you like, I can do without you. Here, would you like me to lend you a hundred francs?"

And he pulled out some bank notes, which he spread out on his lap, laughing loudly; then he ruffled them, waved them under the nose of the priest, threw them into the air. Olympe leapt out of bed, half-naked; she snatched up the notes and hid them under the pillow, looking cross. Meanwhile, Abbé Faujas was gazing about the room in great surprise. There were liqueur bottles standing on the chest of drawers, a ~~nasty pie~~, almost untouched, on the mantel-piece, and sweets in a battered cardboard box. The room was full of things obviously bought recently: dresses thrown over chairs; an open parcel of lace; a splendid brand-new overcoat hanging on the window-catch; a bear-skin mat lying beside the bed. Next to the glass of toddy on the night-table he saw something gleaming: it was a woman's tiny gold watch in a china cup.

you live nice and snug what with Madame Mouret and the cook. That's your business, we're not going to look into your plate or take the tit-bits out of your mouth. We leave you to paddle your own canoe. All right, then, don't plague us; give us the same liberty. I think I'm very reasonable."

And as the priest began to gesture, she went on:

"Yes, I know; you're always afraid of our spoiling your plans. And the best way to stop that is to stop plaguing us. You keep on saying: 'Ah, if I'd known, I would have left you where you were,' but you don't ring the bell with us, not for all your grand airs. We've got the same aims as you, this is a family concern, and we can make our nest together. Things could be very nice, if you agreed. So go to bed, now. I'll scold Trouche tomorrow; I'll send him to you, and you can give him your orders."

"Sure," mumbled the drunkard, who was dropping off to sleep. "Faujas is peculiar. I'm not after the missus downstairs, I'd rather have her money."

At this, Olympe began laughing shamelessly, looking straight at her brother as she did so. She had gone back to bed, and was snuggling down comfortably, with her back to the pillow. The priest, who was somewhat pale, appeared to be thinking: after which he left them without saying a word, and Olympe picked up her novel, while Trouche fell a-snoring on the couch.

Next day Trouche, sober again, had a long talk with Abbé Faujas. When he came back to his wife, he informed her of the terms on which peace had been made.

"Now listen, dearest," she said. "Mind you satisfy him and do just what he asks. Do try especially to be useful to him, since he's giving you the chance. I look brave enough when he's here, but down inside myself I know very well that he would kick us out into the street like dogs, if we drove him to it. And I don't want to go away. Are you sure he'll keep us here?"

"Yes, don't worry," replied the clerk. "He needs me; he'll let us feather our nest."

From this time forward, Trouche went out every evening about nine, when the streets were deserted. He told his wife that he was going into the old part of the town on propaganda work for the priest. And in any case, Olympe wasn't jealous; she used to laugh when he came home with some risky story. What she really liked was an evening entirely to herself with goodies, little glasses to sip all alone, sweet biscuits beside her to munch; nice long evenings.

tucked warmly in bed, devouring battered novels from a lending library which she had discovered in Cluckett Street. Trouche used to come home reasonably drunk, take his boots off in the hall to come up the stairs quietly. But when he had taken a good drop too much and reeked of brandy and tobacco, his wife wouldn't have him beside her; he was driven off, expelled to the couch. This led to covert battles, waged in silence; back he would come with the drunkard's persistence, hook his hands in the blankets; then he slipped over, fell on to his hands, and she would roll him away like a log. If he gave voice, she got him by the throat, stared into his eyes, and whispered:

"Ovid can hear you, Ovid's coming."

That scared him, like a child warned of the wolf. He would drop off to sleep with a mumbled apology. But when the sun was up next morning, there he was like any sober citizen, shaving, washing off his marbled face the murk of the night before, tying a special cravat which, he said, made him look "quite a barn-stormer". He walked past the cafés, eyes modestly down. They respected him at the Hospice of the Virgin. Sometimes when the girls were playing in the courtyard, he used to lift the edge of a curtain, watch them benevolently, while little flames flickered under his half-closed eyelids.

The Trouches were still kept under by Madame Faujas. Daughter and mother were always quarrelling; one complained that she had always been sacrificed for her brother, the other called her a nasty thing that she ought to have stifled in her cradle. Both had their teeth in the same prey: snarling, they kept their eyes fixed on each other, never letting go their hold, jealously wondering which would bite out the largest piece. Madame Faujas was after the whole house; she guarded the very sweepings from her daughter's claws. When she realized what heavy sums Olympe was extracting from Marthe's pockets, she became almost violent. Since her son just shrugged his shoulders, like a man despising all pettiness who is forced to shut his eyes, she in her turn had a grim hour with her daughter, whom she called a thief, as if she had been taking the money out of her own pocket.

"Now then, now then, mum, that's quite enough!" said Olympe, losing her patience. "It's not your purse that's dangling, maybe. After all, I'm only borrowing money as yet, I'm not getting fat."

"What d'you mean, you scab?" Madame Faujas scuttled out, exasperated beyond measure. "Don't we pay for our meals? And cook, she'll show you our account book."

When summer came, the life about the house became even more noticeable. Abbé Faujas used to receive the sub-prefect's friends and the judge's friends in the arbour at the end of the garden. Rose, on Marthe's orders, had bought a dozen rustic chairs, so that people could enjoy the fresh air without the trouble of continually moving out the dining-room chairs. The meetings had become a habit. Every Tuesday afternoon the doors into the lane stood open; the neighbours, both ladies and gentlemen, came to spend an hour with the rector, wearing straw hats and slippers, and open coats, and skirts tucked short with pins. Visitors dropped in one by one, until the two groups gradually became complete, blended, mingled and chatted together gaily in the friendliest way in the world.

"You're not afraid of these meetings with the band from Government House?" said Monsieur Bourdeu one day to Monsieur Rastoil. "Supposing they were wrongly interpreted? The general election's getting near."

"Why should they be wrongly interpreted?" answered Monsieur Rastoil. "We don't go to Government House, we're on neutral ground. Also, my friend, there's no ceremony whatsoever at the meetings. I just wear my light summer jacket. It's private life. No one has the right to judge what I do at the back of my house. In the front it's another matter; we belong to the public in front. We don't even greet each other in the streets, Monsieur Péqueur and I."

"Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies is a man who greatly improves upon acquaintance," hazarded the ex-prefect after a silence.

"Certainly," answered the judge: "I am delighted to have made his acquaintance. And what a worthy man our rector is! No, indeed, I have no fear of gossip when I go to visit our excellent neighbour."

Since talk had begun about the general election, Monsieur de Bourdeu had been getting uneasy; he found the early heat of summer very trying, he said. Often he felt scruples and expressed doubts to Monsieur Rastoil, so that his friend could reassure him. Never, moreover, were politics mentioned in the Mourets' garden. One afternoon Monsieur de Bourdeu, after vainly looking for a transition, blurted out to Dr. Porquier:

"I say, doctor, did you see *The Monitor* this morning? The Marquis has made a speech in the Chamber at last: just thirteen words; I counted them. Poor Lagrifoul! He had a roaring success."

Abbé Faujas raised a finger, with such a wise little friendly look.

"Now, gentlemen, no politics, no politics," he said gently.

Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies was chatting with Monsieur Rastoil; both pretended they had heard nothing. Madame de Condamin gave a smile, then she went on with her conversation, speaking to Abbé Surin:

"Tell me, monsieur l'abbé, your surplices are starched with water containing just a little gum, aren't they?"

"Yes, madame, a touch of gum," said the young priest. "There are laundresses who use boiled starch, but it cuts the muslin; it's no good."

"Well," replied the young woman, "I can't get my laundress to use gum for my petticoats."

So Abbé Surin obligingly gave her the address of his laundress on the back of one of his visiting cards. And so the talk went on about dresses, the weather, the crops, the events of the week. And a delightful hour of it they all had. Badminton games in the lane interrupted the conversation. Abbé Bourrette came quite often, and with a beaming face told little stories of saintliness which Monsieur Maffre followed attentively to the very end. Once and once only Madame Delangre met Madame Rastoil there; both were very polite, very much on ceremony; into their quiet eyes leapt a sudden flame, kindled by their rivalry of years ago. Monsieur Delangre was rather reserved. As for Monsieur and Madame Paloque, if they still went to Government House, they avoided being there when Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies was going to drop in on Abbé Faujas; the magistrate's wife didn't feel quite sure about things since that unfortunate expedition to the hospice. But the most assiduous visitor was certainly Monsieur de Condamin. He came, in the most impeccable gloves, just to laugh at people, draw the long bow, venture on dirty topics with the utmost assurance, finding matter for a week in the intrigues he had nosed out. This tall old man, who held himself so straight in his tight-waisted frock coat, had a passion for young people. He used to laugh at the "old things", wander off with the young ladies in his group, guffaw in corners.

"This way, kiddies!" he used to say with a smile. "We'll leave the old things to themselves."

One day he almost beat Abbé Surin in a tremendous game of badminton. But in fact he was really pulling the legs of these young people. The victim he fastened upon especially was Rastoil's son, an innocent lad to whom he told the most impossible stories. Finally he accused him of paying court to his wife and rolled his eyes terribly, which made the unfortunate Séverin fairly quake and

perspire. And the worst of it was that the boy really thought he was in love with Madame de Condamin; he used to stand and gaze at her, looking half timid and half tender, all of which her husband found vastly entertaining.

And the Rastoil girls, to whom the Keeper of Woods and Waters behaved with all a young widower's gallantry, were also the victims of his cruellest pranks. Though they were nearing thirty, he used to make them play babyish games, talk to them as if they were schoolgirls. His greatest treat was to examine their faces closely when Lucien Delangre, the mayor's son, happened to be there. He used to draw Dr. Porquier aside—a man one could say anything to—and whisper, after alluding to the past liaison between Monsieur Delangre and Madame Rastoil:

"I say, Porquier, that boy's in a difficult position: which was fathered by Delangre—Angéline, or Aurélie? Guess, if you can; choose, if you dare."

Meanwhile Abbé Faujas was friendly to every one of his visitors, even that dreadful Condamin—such an embarrassment. As far as possible he effaced himself, spoke but little, leaving the two groups to mingle into one, seeming only to enjoy the discreet pleasure of a host, happy to serve as a link between people of distinction, made to understand one another. Twice Marthe had thought it incumbent upon her to put the visitors at their entire ease by being present. But she could hardly bear to see the priest among all these guests; she waited till he was alone, she preferred him in his serious mood, when he went slowly walking in the quietness of the arbour. But the Trouches—they had to retreat on these Tuesdays behind their bedroom curtains, resume their envious peeping; while Madame Faujas and Rose used to stand well back in the hall, crane their necks forward, and go into ecstasies of admiration over the gracious ways of the Rector as he received all the most sedate citizens in Plassans.

"Yes, madame," said the cook, "you can tell at once that he's a real gentleman. There, look at him greeting the sub-prefect. I'd far rather have the rector, though the sub-prefect is a handsome man. Now, why don't you go into the garden? If I was you, I'd put on a silk dress and go. You're his mother, after all."

But the old peasant merely shrugged her shoulders.

"He's not ashamed of me," she answered, "but I'm afraid of making him feel awkward. I'd rather he gives me more pleasure, this way."

"Ah, I understand that. You must feel very proud. He's not like Monsieur Mouret, who nailed up the garden door to stop anyone coming in. Not one visitor, never a dinner to cook, and the garden empty enough in the evening to give you the creeps. It used to be lone wolf here. True, Monsieur Mouret would have had no idea how to entertain; what a face he put on, when anyone dropped in by chance. Now I ask you if he didn't ought to take the rector for an example. Instead of shutting myself in, I should go out to the garden, enjoy myself a bit with other folk; in fact, live up to my station. But no, there he is upstairs, hiding as if he feared the plague. And by the way, what would you say to our going up to see what he's doing?"

One Tuesday they did go up. On that day, the company in the garden was very noisy; laughter floated in through the open windows and up the stairs, and a tradesman who had brought a basket of wine for the Trouches was making a clatter on the second floor with broken glass, as he collected the empty bottles. Mouret had shut himself in with a double turn of the key.

"The key's in my way," said Rose, after putting her eye to the keyhole.

"Just a moment," whispered Madame Faujas.

Then deftly she turned the end of the key, which was sticking out a little. Mouret was in the centre of the room, sitting at a large empty table, thickly covered with dust; no book lay before him, not a sheet of paper. He was leaning right back in a chair, his arms hanging loose, his face white and rigid, his eyes gazing vacantly into space. He was quite still.

The two women examined him silently, one after the other.

"He made me cold to the marrow," whispered Rose as they crept downstairs. "Did you notice his eyes? And what dust! He hasn't put a pen down on the table for quite two months. And there was I thinking that he was writing in there! Fancy now: the house so bright and all, and him playing dead man, all alone!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MARTHE's health was causing Dr. Porquier some uneasiness. He still wore his affable smile, attended her as a doctor moving in the best circles, for whom there was no such thing as illness, and gave a consultation much as a dressmaker tries on a dress; but there was a little twist of his lip which said that "the dear lady" wasn't merely suffering from a bleeding cough, as he would have her believe. He advised her to take a little relaxation on fine days and go out driving, without tiring herself though. So Marthe, who was afflicted more and more with a vague distress, with a longing for something to do that would soothe her nervous restlessness, arranged to go for drives round the outlying villages. Twice a week she set out after lunch in an old revarnished carriage hired from a coachmaker in Plassans; she used to drive out seven or eight miles so as to be back about six. She cherished the hope that she could get Abbé Faujas to come: in fact it was only this dream that made her follow the doctor's advice. But the priest, though he did not refuse outright, always had the excuse that he was too busy. She had to be content with the company of Olympe or Madame Faujas.

One afternoon she happened to be driving with Olympe through the village of Les Tulettes, past uncle Macquart's little place. Old Macquart caught sight of her and shouted down from his terrace where two mulberry trees were growing:

"And where's Mouret? Why hasn't Mouret come?"

So she had to stop for a little, and then explain at great length that she was unwell and couldn't stay for supper. Macquart insisted on killing a chicken.

"Never mind," he said at last. "I'll kill one all the same. You can take it home with you." And off he went at once to kill it. When he came back with the chicken, he laid it out on the stone table in front of the house, and proudly said:

"Isn't he a plump chappie?"

Uncle Macquart had just been discussing a bottle of wine under his mulberry trees with a companion, a tall lean man dressed all in grey. He persuaded the two women to take a seat, bringing out chairs and doing the honours of his home with a chuckle of satisfaction:

"I'm nice and snug here, aren't I? My mulberry trees are really fine. In summer-time I smoke my pipe out in the cool. In winter I sit over there in the sun, in the shelter of the wall. See my vegetables? The chicken-run's at the bottom. I've got another bit of ground at the back of the house, where there are potatoes and lucerne. Ah well, I'm getting on, you know; it's time I enjoyed myself a bit."

He rubbed his hands together, gently turned his head about, dwelling on his little place with a fond eye. But then a thought seemed to cast a gloom.

"Is it long since you saw your father?" he asked suddenly. "Rougon's not very kind. See there, on the left, that field of corn; it's for sale. If he had been willing, we could have bought it. It wouldn't have hurt him, would it? He sleeps on silver coin. A paltry three thousand francs, I think. And he wouldn't. Last time, he even sent word by your mother that he wasn't in for it. You'll see, that won't bring them luck."

He repeated this several times, with nods of his head, and that unpleasant laugh of his:

"No, it won't bring them luck."

Then he went to fetch some glasses; he insisted that the two women should have a taste of his wine. This was his little St. Eutrope wine, his own find, and he drank it devoutly. Marthe hardly wet her lips. Olympe finished what was left in the bottle, then she accepted a glass of red-currant syrup; the wine was very strong, she said.

"And how's your priest? What are you doing with him?" the uncle suddenly asked his niece.

Marthe, surprised and offended, looked at him without answering. "I heard that he was pressing you hard," her uncle went on, in a loud noisy voice. "Cassocks only like guzzling. When I heard that, I said serve Mouret right. I warned him. Ah, if it was me, I'd have your priest out through the door. Mouret's only got to come and ask me what I think; I'll even lend him a hand, if he likes. I never could stand the animals. I know one, Abbé Fenil, who's got a house on the other side of the road. He's no better than the rest,

but he's as sharp as a monkey, he amuses me. I believe he doesn't get on too well with your priest, does he?"

Marthe had turned quite pale.

"This lady is Abbé Faujas' sister," she said, pointing to Olympe, who was following all this with interest.

"It doesn't affect the lady, what I'm saying," replied her uncle, *not disconcerted in the least*. "She doesn't mind. She's going to have another drop of syrup."

Olympe let him give her several drops of syrup. But Marthe, who *had risen to her feet*, wanted to go. Her uncle forced her to have a look round his property. At the end of the garden she stopped to look at a large white building standing on the slope, a few hundred yards outside Les Tulettes. The inner courts were like prison yards, the narrow, evenly-spaced windows, scoring the fronts with black bars, gave the central part of the building the bleak look of a hospital.

"That's the lunatic asylum," said her uncle, following the line of her gaze. "That man over there is one of the warders. We're on quite friendly terms; he comes and drinks a bottle of wine now and then."

Turning to the man dressed in grey, who was finishing his glass under a mulberry-tree, he shouted:

"Hi, Alexandre! just come and show my niece our poor old lady's window."

Alexandre obligingly stepped forward.

"Do you see those three trees?" he said, stretching out his finger as if he was drawing a plan in the air. "Well, a little above the one on the left, you ought to be able to see a fountain in the corner of a courtyard. Follow the ground-floor windows along to the right: it's the fifth window."

Marthe stood there quite silent, white-lipped, with her eyes helplessly riveted on that window. Uncle Macquart was looking too, but just in a friendly way that made him blink.

"I can see her sometimes," he went on, "in the morning, when the sun's over on the other side. She's very well, isn't she, Alexandre? That's what I always tell them when I go to Plassans. I'm well placed here to keep an eye on her. One couldn't be better placed."

A chuckle of satisfaction slipped out.

"You see, my girl, heads are no stronger on the Rougon side than on the Macquart side. When I'm sitting here, facing that great devil of a house, I often say to myself that the whole *race* come

along one day perhaps, since the mother's in there. I've got nothing to fear myself, thank God; the old nut's screwed on the right way. But I know some who are jolly well balmy. Well, I'll be on hand here if they come, I'll see them from my shanty and recommend them to Alexandre, even if some of the family haven't always been nice to me."

Then he added with that frightful smile of his, the smile of the hunter home from the kill:

"It's a grand bit of luck for you all that I'm here at Les Tulettes."

Marthe began trembling. Though she knew her uncle had a taste for grim jokes and delighted in torturing folks to whom he brought rabbits, it seemed to her that he was speaking the truth, that the whole family would be coming to live there, in those grey rows of huts. She wouldn't stay another minute, though Macquart kept pressing her, and talked of opening another bottle.

"And what about that chicken?" he cried, just as she was getting into the carriage.

He ran to fetch it, and put it on her lap.

"It's for Mouret, d'you hear?" he said more than once, with spiteful meaning. "For Mouret and no one else, eh? Besides, when I next come to see you, I'll ask him what he thought of it."

He looked at Olympe and screwed up his eyes. As the driver was about to whip up the horse, he held on to the carriage again, and said: "Go and see your dad, and talk to him about that cornfield. See, the field there in front of us. Rougon's wrong. We've been pals too long to quarrel. It would be the worse for him, and he knows it. Make him see that he's wrong."

The carriage started off. Turning round, Olympe could see Macquart under his mulberry trees, chuckling away with Alexandre as he opened that second bottle which he had mentioned. Marthe expressly told the driver not to go by way of Les Tulettes any more. Besides, she was getting tired of these drives; she went out less and less and gave them up altogether when she realized that Abbé Faujas would never agree to go out with her.

Growing up in Marthe now was a very new woman. Her present nervous way of life was refining her. Her middle-class solidity, the stodgy calm induced by fifteen sleepy years spent behind the counter, seemed to be melting away in the flame of her devotions. She was dressing better, and talked now on Thursdays at the Rougons' *salon*.

"Madame Mouret's going back to girlhood," Madame de Condamin said, in wonder.

"Yes," murmured Dr. Porquier as he nodded his head, "she's going down life backwards."

Marthe, more slender and rosier-checked, with magnificent eyes, dark and ardent, now shone for the space of a few months in singular beauty. Her face glowed, and an extraordinary expense of life radiated from her whole being, flowed about her in warm vibrations. It seemed that her forgotten youth was burning in her, at forty, in fiery splendour. But now, set free to pray, impelled by hourly need, she was disobedient to Abbé Faujas. She wore her knees out on the flag-stones in the cathedral, only lived for canticles and adorations, found solace in the gleaming monstrances, the blazing chapels, the altars and priests shining with star-like radiance in the dark setting of the nave. There was a kind of physical appetite in her for all these glories, an appetite that tortured her, wasted her chest and emptied her brain when she did not satisfy it. She suffered too much, she would faint and die, so come she must to seek the food of her passion, cower in whisperings at confessionals, bow to the trembling organ's thunder, die away in the spasm of communion. For then she felt nothing, her body gave her no suffering. She was rapt from earth in throes that were painless, becoming a pure flame consumed by love.

The sternness of Abbé Faujas redoubled: he still checked her by his harshness. She amazed him by her passionate awakening, by the ardour she felt to love and to die. Often he questioned her afresh about her childhood. He went to see Madame Rougon, was left perplexed and unsatisfied with himself.

"The mistress of the house is complaining about you," his mother kept saying. "Why don't you let her go to church when she likes? You are wrong to cross her; she is very good to us."

"She's killing herself," said the priest.

At this Madame Faujas would shrug her shoulders in that way of hers. "That's her own affair. Everybody takes pleasure as they find it. It's better to die by praying than to give yourself indigestion like that hussy Olympe. Don't be so hard on Madame Mouret. Life might become impossible in the house."

One day when she was giving him this advice, he said in a sombre voice: "Mother, this woman will block the road."

"Her!" cried the old peasant; "but she adores you, *Quid!* You can do what you like with her provided you stop scold."

rainy days she would carry you all the way to the cathedral, just to keep you from wetting your feet."

Abbé Faujas himself realized that he must not use any more harshness. He feared some outburst. So gradually he gave Marthe greater liberty, allowing her retreats, long rosaries, prayers repeated at each station of the cross; he allowed her even to come to his confessional at St. Saturnin twice a week. And when Marthe ceased to hear that terrifying voice accusing her of piety as if she was indulging some shameful vice, she thought that God had granted her forgiveness. She entered at last into the joys of paradise. Her heart melted in tenderness, she shed endless tears yet did not feel them flowing; she had attacks of nerves which left her weak and fainting, as if all her life had ebbed away down her cheeks. Rose then would carry her to her bed, where she lay for hours, thin-lipped, open-eyed, like a dead thing.

One afternoon the cook was so scared by Marthe's stillness that she thought she must be dying. Without thinking of knocking at the door where Mouret was shut in, she went up to the second floor, begged Abbé Faujas to come down to her mistress. When he was inside the bedroom, she ran to fetch some ether, leaving him alone with this woman in a faint, slung across the bed. He contented himself with taking Marthe's hands in his own. At this she began tossing, muttering broken phrases. And then, when she recognized him standing just in the alcove, a rush of blood suffused her face, she let her head sink again to the pillow, plucked at the sheets as though to draw them higher.

"Are you feeling better, dear child?" he asked. "You make me feel very uneasy about you."

There was a lump in her throat, she could not answer; she burst out sobbing and let her head toss in the priest's arms.

"I am in no pain, I'm too happy for that," she murmured in a voice faint as a breath. "Let me cry, tears are my joy. Ah, how good of you to come! I have been waiting, calling for you a long long time."

Her voice was growing fainter and fainter, now was only a murmuring ardent prayer:

"Ah, who will lend me wings to fly to you? My soul, far from you, longs to be filled with you, languishes, yearns and yearns, sighing after you, O my God, my consolation, my treasure, my sweetness, my joy and my life, my God and my all——"

She smiled as she uttered these fragments of the act of desire.

The old rancorous leaven of the Rougons rose against this son of a Macquart woman, this man whom she accused of being the plague of her life. Downstairs in the dining-room, when Madame Faujas or Olympe came to keep her company, she no longer held herself in, she poured out her bitterness: "When you think how he kept me for twenty years, like a clerk, pen in ear, between a jar of oil and a bag of almonds! Never any pleasure, not one present. And now he has taken my children from me. He might well clear out of the house one of these days, just to let people think I'm making life impossible for him. Luckily you're here. You could tell everyone the truth."

She attacked Mouret in this way without any provocation. Everything that he did—his glance, his gestures, the few words that he uttered—drove her wild. She could not even set eyes on him without a spontaneous upheaval of rage. Quarrels broke out especially at the end of meals, when Mouret used to fold up his napkin without waiting for dessert and get up silently.

"You might leave the table when others do," she would say to him sourly. "Your behaviour is hardly polite."

"I've finished, I'm going," he used to answer in his slow voice.

But in this daily retreat she saw a manoeuvre designed by her husband to put Abbé Faujas in a false position. So then she used to pass all bounds:

"Your manners are a disgrace. You make me ashamed, you know. Ah, I'd be happier with you if I hadn't met friends kind enough to comfort me for your boorishness. You don't even know how to behave at table: you can't let me have a meal in peace. Stay where you are, do you hear? If you don't want to eat, well, you can look at us."

He would finish folding up his napkin quite calmly, as if he hadn't heard, and leave the room with little steps. He could be heard going upstairs and shutting himself in with a double turn of the key. So half choking she would stammer out: "Oh, the brute! He'll be the death of me, the death of me!"

Madame Faujas had to console her. Rose would run to the foot of the stairs, shouting as loud as she could for Mouret to hear her through his door:

"You are a brute, monsieur; the mistress is quite right to call you a brute!"

Some of their quarrels were especially violent. Marthe, whose reason was going, had the idea that her husband wanted to beat her;

this became an obsession. She maintained that he was watching for a chance. He didn't dare, she said, because he never could find her alone; and at night he was afraid that she would scream and call for help. Rose swore she had seen master hiding a thick stick in his bureau. Madame Faujas and Olympe readily believed these stories; they greatly pitied the mistress of the house, vied for her favour, constituted themselves her guardians. "That savage", as they now called Mouret, wouldn't be so bold, no he wouldn't, as to lay hands on her in their presence. In the evening they said: "Mind you come and fetch us if he moves an inch." The house was in a continual state of alarm.

"He's quite capable of doing something dreadful," said the cook.

That year Marthe followed the celebrations of Holy Week with the utmost fervour. On Good Friday in the dark cathedral she was in agonies, as the candles were put out one by one to the storm-like wailing of voices rolling through the gloom of the nave. It seemed to her as though her breath was petering out with the candles. As the last taper died, and the wall of shadow facing her closed in relentlessly, she fainted away, her sides tense, her chest emptied of breath. A whole hour she stayed bent low on her chair, in the attitude of prayer, and none of the kneeling women round her were aware of this seizure. The church was empty when she came back to herself. She had been dreaming that they were scourging her with rods, that blood was flowing from her limbs; there were pains in her head so unbearable that she put her hands up, as if to pluck out the thorns that seemed to be piercing her skull. That evening, at supper, she was strange; the nervous disturbance persisted. When she closed her eyes, she could see the dying souls of the candles flying away into the darkness; mechanically she looked at her hands, to see the holes through which her blood had flowed. All the Passion was bleeding in her.

Madame Faujas, seeing that she was unwell, wanted her to go to bed early. She went with her and put her to bed. Mouret, who had a key to the bedroom, had already retired to his bureau, where he spent the evenings. When Marthe, with the blankets drawn up to her chin, said that she was warm, that she felt better, Madame Faujas talked of blowing out the candle to let her sleep in peace. But the sick woman sat up in terror and implored her:

"No, no, don't put the light out; put it on the chest of drawers where I can see it. I was dying, in that dark. . . ."

And with eyes staring wide, as though shuddering at the recollection of some terrible tragedy, she murmured low in terror-stricken pity: "It's horrible, horrible!"

With that she dropped back onto her pillow, and seemed to fall into a doze, so Madame Faujas crept away. That night, everyone in the house was in bed by ten. As she went upstairs Rose noticed that Mouret was still in his bureau. She looked through the keyhole and saw him sleeping over the table with a kitchen candle beside him smoking mournfully.

"Well, that's that! I'm not waking him," she said as she went on upstairs. "If he likes a stiff neck he can have it."

At about midnight, the whole household was sound asleep when screams were heard coming from the first floor. At first they sounded like low wails, but soon they rose to actual shrieks, the hoarse choking cries for help of a victim whose throat had been cut. Abbé Faujas, starting out of his sleep, called his mother. She scarcely took the time to slip on a skirt, and went to knock on Rose's door, saying:

"Quick! come down; I think Madame Mouret is being murdered."

Meanwhile the cries were redoubled. The whole household was quickly afoot. Olympe appeared, with only a wrap over her shoulders, followed by Trouche, who had not long been in, slightly drunk. Rose hurried down, followed by the others.

"Open the door, madame, open!" she cried, frantically, banging with her fists.

Deep sighs were the only sound in answer; then the fall of a body could be heard, a frightful struggle seemed to begin on the floor, and furniture was knocked over. Dull thuds shock the walls; the sounds of a death-agony came through the door, so terrible that the listeners looked at each other and turned pale.

"It's her husband; he's murdering her," muttered Olympe.

"You're right: it's that savage!" said the cook. "I saw him, as I came up, pretending to be asleep. He was getting ready to strike."

Banging again on the door with both fists, near to breaking it, she shouted:

"Open the door, master! We'll send for the guard if you don't. Oh, the villain, he'll end on the scaffold!"

The screams began again. Trouche maintained that the fellow must be bleeding his poor wife like a chicken.

"But we can't just stay here knocking," said Abbé Faujas, stepping forward. "Wait."

He put his strong shoulder to the door and with a slow steady

thrust burst it in. The women dashed into the room, and there the strangest of scenes met their eyes.

On the floor in the middle of the room lay Marthe, her nightdress torn, her skin bleeding from scratches and blue with bruises. Her hair, flowing loose, was twined round the foot of a chair; her hands must have been clutching the chest of drawers with such strength that it was now swung across the door. In a corner Mouret was standing upright, holding the candle in his hand, watching with a stupefied look as his wife lay writhing on the ground.

Abbé Faujas had to push the chest of drawers back to let them in.

"You're a monster!" screamed Rose, going over to Mouret and shaking her fist at him. "Putting a woman into this state! He would have finished her off if we hadn't got in."

Madame Faujas and Olympe were hurriedly attending to Marthe. "Poor thing!" said the first. "She had a presentiment about this, earlier tonight, she was scared."

"Where do you feel pain?" asked Olympe. "You haven't anything broken, have you? Look, this shoulder is quite black, and that knee has a bad scratch. Now, keep-calm. We're here with you, we shall protect you."

Marthe was now moaning like a child. While the two women were examining her, forgetting the presence of the men, Trouche was peering, then casting sly looks at the priest who was unconcernedly straightening the furniture. Rose came to help in getting Marthe back to bed.

When she was in bed and her hair done up, they all remained there a moment, looking curiously round the room, and expecting to hear details. All this time Mouret had still been standing in the same corner, clutching the candlestick as though petrified by what he had seen.

"I assure you," he stammered, "I didn't hurt her; I didn't touch her with my little finger."

"Why, you've been watching your chance this good month," cried Rose, infuriated. "We know it well, we've kept a sharp eye on you. The poor dear was expecting rough treatment from you. Now, none of your lies! It makes me mad!"

The two other women did not think themselves justified in talking to him like this, but they were giving him threatening looks.

"I assure you," Mouret repeated in a quieter voice, "I have not been beating her. I was coming to bed, and I had tied my handkerchief over my head. It was just as I touched the candle, which was

on the chest of drawers, that she woke with a start. She stretched out her arms, uttering a scream, she began striking her forehead with her fists and tearing at her body with her finger-nails."

The cook was shaking her head venomously.

"Why didn't you open the door?" she asked. "We were knocking loud enough."

"I assure you it wasn't me," said Mouret again, even more gently, "I didn't know what was the matter with her. She flung herself on the ground, she was biting herself, taking leaps into the air with enough violence to smash the furniture. I didn't dare get past her; I was stupid with fright. I shouted to you twice to come in, but you couldn't have heard me—she was screaming too loud. I was really frightened. It wasn't me, I assure you."

"Oh, yes! She beat herself, didn't she?" Rose answered with a jeering laugh. And speaking to Madame Faujas, she added: "He must have thrown his stick through the window when he heard us coming."

Mouret had at last put the candle back on the chest of drawers, and was sitting down now, with his hands on his knees. He hadn't another word to say, he was stupidly staring at these half-dressed women flourishing their skinny arms by the bed. Trouche had exchanged a glance with Abbé Faujas. Sitting there in his shirt-sleeves with a yellow neckerchief tied over his bald head, the poor man didn't look very ferocious to them. They came nearer, looked down at Marthe; her face was convulsed, she seemed to be coming out of a dream.

"What's the matter, Rose?" she asked. "Why are there so many people here? I feel exhausted. Do please tell them to leave me in peace."

Rose hesitated for a moment.

"Your husband's in the room, madame," she murmured. "Aren't you afraid to stay alone with him?"

Marthe looked at her in astonishment.

"No, no," she said. "Go away. I'm longing to sleep."

So the five people then left the room, leaving Mouret sitting there, with his eyes vacantly staring at the alcove.

"He can't shut the door now," said the cook as she went upstairs again. "At the very first scream, I'll be down with a run, and fling myself on to his carcase. I'll sleep with my clothes on. Did you hear her lying, poor dear, to stop us giving that old savage a bad time? She wouldn't accuse him—she'd sooner be killed. What a hypocritical look he had, eh?"

The three women talked for a little on the second-floor landing, holding their candlesticks, showing their dessicated bones under their loosely fastened wraps. And they voted that no punishment could be too severe for such a man. Trouche, who was the last to come upstairs, chuckled and murmured from behind Abbé Faujas' cassock: "She's still plump, his wife; only it can't be too pleasant to have a woman writhing her legs about on the floor like a worm."

They went to their rooms. Deep silence returned to the house; the rest of the night passed quietly. When, next morning, the three women wanted to talk about the frightful scene, they found Marthe was surprised; she seemed confused and ashamed. She wouldn't answer, cut the conversation short. She waited till no one was there and sent for a man to repair the door. Madame Faujas and Olympe came to the conclusion that Madame Mouret wanted to avoid a scandal by keeping her mouth shut.

On Easter Day, two days later, Marthe reawoke in fervent joy at St. Saturnin, in the triumphant ceremonies of the resurrection. Friday's gloom was swept away in the dawn; the cathedral to every recess was white, perfumed and shining with lights as for celestial marriage; the choristers' voices streamed out in flute-like sounds. And Marthe felt herself borne up on this song of gladness with a joy yet sharper than her anguish at the crucifixion. She came home with eyes burning, her voice dry; the evening she allowed to run on, talking with a brightness unusual with her. When she went up to her room, Mouret was already in bed. And then, about midnight, terrifying screams again roused the household.

Friday night's scene was repeated; only, at the very first knock on the door, Mouret came and opened it in his nightshirt, with a woe-begone face. Marthe, who was fully dressed, lay sobbing and crying on her face, dashing her head against the foot of the bed. The top part of her dress seemed to be torn away, exposing her neck; two bruises were visible there.

"He must have been trying to strangle her this time," murmured Rose.

The women undressed her. Mouret, after opening the door, had got back into bed, white as the sheets. Not a word did he say in self-defence; he did not seem to hear the indignant words raining down the bedside past his head.

From that time on, similar scenes occurred at irregular intervals. The household lived in constant fear of some crime; the slightest sound brought the upstairs tenants out of their beds. Marthe always

avoided referring to the subject; she wouldn't hear of Rose's suggestion that a camp bed should be made up for Mouret in his bureau. When daylight came, it seemed to brush away even the recollection of strange events in the night.

Meanwhile in the neighbourhood, little by little, rumours were spreading: strange things, it was said, were happening in the Mouret's house. Mouret, the story went, was using a cudgel every night and half killing his wife. Rose had made Madame Faujas and Olympe swear that they wouldn't say a word, as her mistress didn't seem to want to talk; but she herself, what with deplorings and hints and cautious reserves, had helped to build up the legend going round among the shop-keepers. The butcher, who liked his joke, said that Mouret was beating his wife because he had found her in bed with the rector; but the greengrocer's wife stood up for the "poor lady"; she was as spotless as a lamb and couldn't go wrong; while the baker's wife saw in the husband "one of those men who knock their wives about for pleasure". In the market Marthe's name was never mentioned now without a casting of eyes up to heaven, without the wheedling tones used for sick children. When Olympe went to buy a pound of cherries or a basket of strawberries, conversation was sure to turn to the Mourets. Then for a quarter of an hour the most pathetic talk would flow:

"Well, how's it now, at home?"

"Don't talk to me about it. She's crying her eyes right out. It's heartbreaking. One could wish she was dead."

"She bought some artichokes from me the other day; her cheek was all scratches."

"Sure he's murdering her. And if you saw her body like I did. It's just blue all over. He kicks her when she's on the ground. I'm always afraid of finding her with her head bashed in one night, when we get down there."

"It can't be very nice for you, living in the house. I'd move; it would make me ill, seeing such horrors every night."

"And then what would happen to her, poor thing? She's such a lady, and so sweet! We're staying for her sake. It's twopence ha'penny, isn't it, for the pound of cherries?"

"Yes, twopence ha'penny. Never you mind, you can stick it, you've a good heart."

This story of a husband who waited till midnight to bash his wife with a stick was just the thing to thrill the market gossips. Ghastly details were added each day. One church-goer said that Mouret was

possessed, that he fixed his teeth into his wife's neck so savagely that Abbé Faujas had to make the sign of the cross three times in the air with his left thumb before Mouret would let go. And then, she added, Mouret used to fall all in a heap on the floor, and a big black rat used to jump out of his mouth and disappear, though there wasn't a sign of the tiniest hole in the floor. The tripe-men at the corner of Taravelle Street terrified the whole neighbourhood by voicing the opinion that "the ruffian had perhaps been bitten by a mad dog."

But the story had a more sceptical audience among respectable folk in Plassans. When it reached Sauvaire Place, it was found very amusing by the rows of decent little retired men, sitting along the benches, sunning themselves in the warmth of May.

"Mouret's not capable of wife-beating," said the retired almondd-dealer. "He looks as though he'd been punished, he's taking no more walks. It must be his wife: she's got him on bread and water."

"You can't tell," said a captain on half-pay. "I knew an officer in my regiment whose wife used to cuff him for a mere nothing. It went on for ten years. One day she tried kicks instead; he flew into a fury and nearly strangled her. Perhaps Mouret doesn't like kicks either."

"No doubt he likes priests even less," said someone with a mocking laugh, by way of conclusion.

For some time Madame Rougon appeared to be unaware of this scandal busy in the town. She kept her smile, skirted round allusions made in her presence. But one day, after a long visit paid by Monsieur Delangre, she called to see her daughter; she had tears in her eyes and looked scared.

"Ah, my dear child," she said, taking Marthe in her arms. "What have I been hearing? Can your husband be forgetting himself so far as to raise his hand against you? It's all lies, isn't it? I denied it all very strongly. His manners are bad, but he's not wicked."

Marthe blushed: she showed the confusion and shame that she always felt whenever the subject was mentioned in her presence.

"Ah, the mistress is not going to make complaints!" cried Rose with her usual boldness. "I should have come to warn you long before now, if I wasn't afraid of her scolding me."

The old lady let her hands drop, looking painfully, immensely surprised.

"So it's true, then? He's beating you?" she murmured. "Oh the wretch!"

And she began to cry.

"To reach my age and see such things! A man that we loaded

with benefits at his father's death, when he was only a small assistant with us! It was my husband who wanted you two to marry. I told him that I didn't trust Mouret's eyes. Besides that, he has never behaved well towards us; he settled at Plassans when he retired just to taunt us with the sixpences he'd saved. God be thanked, we didn't need him, we were richer than he was, and that's just what annoyed him. He has a small mind: he is so jealous, that he has always boorishly refused to set foot in my *salon*; he would burst with envy. But I shan't leave you with such a monster, my daughter. There are laws in this land, luckily."

"Now don't worry; there's a great deal of exaggeration, I can assure you," murmured Marthe, looking more and more embarrassed.

"You'll see," said the cook; "she's going to defend him now."

Meanwhile Abbé Faujas and Trouche had been having a long consultation down at the end of the garden; they now came forward, attracted by the sound of talking.

"Monsieur le curé, I am a very unhappy mother," said Madame Rougon, raising her voice to louder lament. "I have only the one daughter, and now I learn that she hasn't the eyes to weep with. I beg you—you who live with her, be her comfort and her guard."

The priest was looking at her, as though to divine the explanation of this sudden sorrow.

"I have just seen someone whom I prefer not to mention by name," she continued, looking steadily in her turn at the priest. "This person alarmed me. God knows that I am not trying to heap hot coals on my son-in-law! But it's my duty, isn't it, to stand up for my daughter's rights? Well, my son-in-law is a wretch; he is ill-treating his wife, he is scandalising the town, he has a hand in every unpleasant business. You'll see that he'll compromise himself further, when the next elections come. Last time, he was the leader of all the suburban scum. This will be the death of me, monsieur le curé."

"Monsieur Mouret wouldn't allow any remarks to be made to him," the priest suggested.

"Yet I can't desert my daughter, leave her in such hands!" cried Madame Rougon. "I will not let dishonour come upon us. Justice is not made for dogs."

Trouche was lolling near by. He now took advantage of the pause "Monsieur Mouret's mad," he declared bluntly.

The word fell like a thunderbolt. They all stared at each other.

"I mean he's not sound in his head," Trouche went on. "You've

only got to look at his eyes. No, I tell you frankly I'm not easy. There was a man at Besançon who adored his daughter and then murdered her one night, without knowing anything about it."

"Master's been cracked quite a while," muttered Rose.

"But this is frightful!" cried Madame Rougon. "You're right; he looked quite unusual to me the last time that I saw him. His mind has never been too clear. Ah, my poor darling, you must tell me all! I shan't sleep in peace any longer. Do you hear; at the first sign of peculiarity in your husband, don't hesitate, don't expose yourself to danger any further. Madmen are locked up."

And with that, she left. When Trouche was alone with the priest, he laughed his nasty laugh, disclosing his black teeth.

"Our landlady will be owing me a fine candle," he said in a cautious voice. "Now she can wriggle and writhe to her heart's content in the dark."

The priest's countenance was earthy and pale, his eyes were fixed on the ground; he did not reply. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went away to read his breviary under the arbour at the end of the garden.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ON Sunday it was Mouret's habit, as a retired tradesman, to go for a stroll in the town. This was now the only day in the week when he broke the close wall of solitude that, rather guiltily, he had built round him. The habit was mechanical. In the morning he shaved, put on a white shirt, brushed his coat and hat. Then, after lunch, somehow he found himself walking along the street, taking little steps, looking nice and tidy, with his hands behind his back.

One Sunday, as he was setting out from home, he noticed Rose on the side-walk in Balande Street, talking eagerly with Madame Rastoi's servant. The two cooks stopped talking as soon as they saw him. They stared at him in such a peculiar way that he looked down to see if a handkerchief was trailing out of one of his back pockets. When he reached Government Square he looked back, and saw them still standing at the same place. Rose was imitating the swaying walk of a drunken man, and the judge's servant was in fits of laughter.

"I'm walking too fast; they're laughing at me," thought Mouret. So he walked still more slowly. In Banne Street, as he drew nearer the market, the shopkeepers all hurried to their doors, following him curiously with their eyes. He gave a little nod to the butcher, who was so flabbergasted that he did not respond. The baker's wife, whom he greeted by raising his hat, appeared so frightened that she started back into her shop. The greengrocer woman, the grocer and the pastry-cook were pointing fingers at him across the road. Behind him he was leaving quite a commotion; groups formed, sounds of voices rose, mingled with laughter.

"Did you notice how stiffly he walks?"

"Yes. When he wanted to step over the gutter, he nearly came a cropper."

"They're all like that, they say."

"Maybe, but he gave me such a turn. Why do they let him come out? It ought to be forbidden."

Mouret, feeling very puzzled, didn't like to look round again. He was vaguely uneasy, though he didn't understand clearly that they were talking about him. He walked on faster, swinging his arms freely. He regretted putting on his old frock coat, a brown one, out of fashion now. When he got to the market, he hesitated for a moment, then resolutely walked in among the women selling the vegetables. But his appearance here caused a regular upheaval.

All the housewives in Plassans drew back in rows to let him pass. The market women standing at their stalls, hands on hips, eyed him up and down. There was pushing, women stepped up on to the boundary-stones at the corn market. On he hurried, still faster, trying to get clear, refusing to believe that he could possibly be the cause of all this clamour.

"Look, his arms are going like windmill sails," said a peasant woman selling fruit.

"He's walking like a half-wit, he nearly knocked me so!" one put in a salad-woman.

"Stop him! Stop him!" joked the flour-dealers.

Mouret, overcome by curiosity, came to a standstill and in his innocence stood up on tip-toe to see what was happening: he thought they had just caught a thief. A great roar of laughter ran along the crowd; booing, whistles, cat-calls were heard.

"He's not dangerous; don't hurt him."

"Hm, I wouldn't be too sure. He gets up at night and chivvies people."

"Yes, he's got a wicked pair of eyes."

"So it came over him all of a sudden, like?"

"Yes, all of a sudden. My, what strange things we mortals are! Such a mild sort of man, he was. I'm going off: he makes me feel queer. Here's three half-pence for the turnips."

Mouret had just recognised Olympie in the middle of a group of women. She had bought some splendid peaches, which she was carrying in a real lady's work-bag. She must be in the middle of some very moving tale, because the gossips round her were unendingly stifled exclamations, and clasping their hands in a really pathetic way.

"And then," she concluded, "he seized her by the hair and would have cut her throat with a razor lying on the chest of drawers if we hadn't got there just in time to prevent the crime. Don't say anything to him, he would do a mischief."

"Eh, what mischief?" asked Mouret in great alarm.

The woman darted apart and Olympe seemed to be standing on guard; then she dodged away cautiously, muttering:

"Don't be angry, Monsieur Mouret. I think you'd better go home."

Mouret took refuge in a side-lane leading to Sauvaire Place. The shouts redoubled; for a few moments the rumble of the uproar from the market followed on his heels.

"What's the matter with them all today?" he wondered. "Perhaps it was me they were laughing at. Yet I didn't hear my name spoken. There must have been an accident."

He took off his hat and examined it, fearing that some urchin might have thrown a handful of dust at him. But no, and he had no kite-tail or wax taper either hanging behind. This inspection reassured him. He went on with his Sunday stroll, down the quiet side-lane and came out calmly into Sauvaire Place. All the old cronies were sitting on their usual bench in the sun.

"Hullo! there's Mouret!" said the half-pay captain, looking tremendously surprised.

The liveliest curiosity was suddenly depicted on the sleepy faces of his friends. They just sat without getting up, all poking their heads forward. Mouret was left standing in front of them. They looked him over in minute detail from head to foot.

"So you're out for a little stroll?" said the captain, who seemed the boldest.

"Yes, a little stroll," repeated Mouret in an absent-minded way. "The weather's very fine."

His audience exchanged knowing smiles. They were cold, and the sky had just clouded over.

"Very fine," said the old tanner; "you're not hard to please. It's true that you're already dressed for winter. That's a funny coat you've got on."

The smiles turned to sniggers. Mouret seemed to be struck with a sudden idea.

"Just have a look," he asked, turning round quickly; "I haven't got a sun drawn on my back, have I?"

The retired almond merchants couldn't keep a straight face any longer; they burst out laughing. The jester of the party, the captain, screwed up his eyes to look.

"Where d'you mean, a sun?" he asked. "I only see a moon."

The rest of them exploded, finding this very witty.

was laughing at him. Seized with apprehension, he bent his head, very puzzled by this hostility, and slipped away along the house-fronts. Just as he turned into Cluckett Street, he heard noises behind him; he looked round and saw that three boys were following him; two tall and bold-looking, and a tiny one, very solemn, clutching an old orange which he had picked out of a gutter. Now he walked down to the end of the street, cut across Récollets Place and found himself in Banne Street. The boys were still following.

"Would you like your ears pulled?" he shouted, suddenly advancing upon them.

They dodged away, laughing, bawling, and scrambled out of range on all fours. Mouret turned very red; he was a laughing-stock. Doing his best to calm down, he continued his stroll. What appalled him was the thought of crossing Government Place, walking under the Rougons' windows, with this band of rascals at his heels; he could hear them getting bolder and bolder and growing-in numbers. And as he walked on, there as luck would have it he saw his mother-in-law coming home from vespers, accompanied by Madame de Condamin. He had to make a turn to avoid them.

"Woo, woo, wolf!" the urchins were shouting.

Sweat came on his brow, his feet stumbled on the cobblestones. He heard old Madame Rougon saying to the wife of the Keeper of Woods and Waters: "Oh, just look at the miserable fellow! It's a disgrace. We can't tolerate this any longer."

So then he couldn't help it: Mouret took to his heels. Hands stretched out and utterly bewildered, he dashed into Balande Street followed by the crowd of urchins to the number of eleven or twelve. It seemed as though all the shopmen from Banne Street, all the market women, the strollers from Sauvaire Place, the young fellows from the club, the Rougons, the Condamins—every soul in Plassans, were rushing along after him, down the steeply-sloping street. The boys were stamping with their feet, sliding over the pointed cobble, raising the clamour of a hunting pack in this quiet part of the town.

"Catch him!" they yelled.

"Hoo! hoo! Ain't he funny, him and his old coat!"

"Hi! you chaps! Run round by Taravelle Street; you'll nab him!"

"Faster, look sharp!"

Panic-stricken, Mouret made a desperate dash for his but his foot slipped and over he went, rolling down the then lay there a few seconds, helpless. The urchins, f kicks, danced round him uttering triumphant yells, while t

one, stepping forward solemnly, threw the rotten orange; it squashed over his left eye. Mouret rose heavily to his feet and, without wiping his face, got in through the door. Rose had to take a broom to drive the young devils off.

After this Sunday, everyone in Plassans was convinced that Mouret was completely mad. Surprising facts were given. For example: he was shutting himself up for days in a bare room left unswept for a whole year. And this was no idle invention, because the people who told the story had heard it from the actual servant of the house. What could he be up to in this bare room? Accounts varied, but the servant said that he was playing dead man, which terrified the whole neighbourhood. In the market, it was firmly believed that he was hiding a coffin there, in which he stretched himself out at full length with his eyes open and his hands across his breast; and this from morning to night, for the sheer pleasure of it.

"This attack's been on the way for a long time," Olympie kept saying in all the shops. "It's been hatching slowly: he was turning gloomy, looking for corners to hide in, you know, like sick animals do. Yes, as soon as I set foot in that house, I said to my husband: 'The landlord's in a bad way.' His eyes were yellow, and he looked sullen. And ever since, the house has been upside down. He had all sorts of crazes: counting the lumps of sugar, even locking up the bread. He was so beastly avaricious that his poor wife hadn't the boots to put on her feet. Ah now, there's an unhappy woman for you! I pity her with all my heart! She's had something to put up with, I can tell you. Just imagine her life with this lunatic; he can't even behave properly at table now; he chucks his napkin into the middle of the dinner, and then walks out looking muzzy, after dabbling in his plate. And a nagger, on top of all that! He used to make a scene if the mustard pot was out of place. But now he never opens his mouth: he looks at you like a wild animal, jumps at people's throats without uttering any cry.—Oh, I see some strange things! And if I wanted to speak . . ."

When she had worked up burning curiosity in this way, and people were pressing her with questions, she used to add in a lower voice:

"No, no, it's none of my business. Madame Mouret's a saint of a woman, she suffers like a true christian; she's got her own ideas there, and one ought to respect them.—Can you believe it: he tried to cut her throat with a razor!"

The story was always the same, but she was sure of getting her

effect every time: fists clenched, women talked of strangling Mouret. If some unbeliever shook her head, they flummoxed her by asking how she explained the appalling scenes that took place every night; only a madman was capable of flying at his wife's throat in this way, as soon as she went to bed. There was a touch of the mysterious here which was singularly helpful in spreading the story through the town. For nearly a month the noise of it swelled. But in Balande Street, for all Olympe's fearful tales, calm had supervened, nights passed quietly. Marthe showed nervous irritability when those around her, without speaking too plainly, counselled great prudence.

"You want to go your own way, don't you?" said Rose. "You wait. He'll start it again. And one of these fine mornings we'll find you murdered."

Madame Rougon made a pretence now of running in every other day. She came in, looking dreadfully anxious, and tackled Rose in the hall: "Well? No accident today?"

And when she set eyes on her daughter, she hugged her passionately as if she had feared to find her already gone. Her nights were dreadful, she said; she was always anticipating bad news, trembled each time she heard a bell; she was almost dead. And when Marthe assured her that she was in no danger, she looked at her admiringly and cried:

"But you're an angel! If I wasn't here, you'd let yourself be done to death without so much as a sigh! But have no fear; I'm watching over you, I'm taking my precautions. The day your husband lifts his little finger, he'll be hearing from me."

She didn't explain beyond this. The fact was that she was calling on every official in Plassans, and in this way she had recounted her daughter's troubles to the mayor, the sub-prefect, the presiding judge, very confidentially, extracting promises from each of the utmost discretion.

"I come to you as a despairing mother," she murmured with a tear. "I lay in your hands the honour, the dignity of my unhappy daughter. My husband would fall ill if there was a public scandal, yet I cannot wait till some fatal catastrophe occurs. Give me your advice then, tell me what I ought to do."

The gentlemen were most sympathetic. They calmed her fears, promised her to watch over Madame Mouret, without actually intervening. Moreover, at the first sign of danger they would act. She was particularly pressing with Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies

and Monsieur Rastoil, both of their neighbours to her son-in-law, who could step in immediately, if trouble occurred.

This story of a rational madman, waiting for the stroke of midnight before he turned furious, gave a real spice to the gatherings of the two groups in the very garden of the house. Considerable eagerness was shown in calling on Abbé Faujas. At four o'clock the priest came down to receive one and all in his friendly way in the arbour; he continued to efface himself, mostly answering with amiable nods. During the first few visits, only veiled allusions were made to the drama taking place inside the house. But one Tuesday, Monsieur Maffre ventured on a question. He had been scanning the house-front rather uneasily, and now with a glance indicated a window on the first floor:

"That's the room, isn't it?"

So then the two groups, in lowered tones, began talking of the strange doings which were upsetting the whole neighbourhood. The priest gave some rather vague explanations: it was very regrettable, very sad; he was sorry for everyone. Further he did not go.

"But you, doctor," Madame Condamin said to Dr. Porquier: "You who attend here professionally, what do you have to say about all this?"

Dr. Porquier shook his head a long time before making a reply. Above all he posed as a man of discretion.

"It's a very delicate matter," he murmured. "Madame Mouret's health is not good. As for Monsieur Mouret——"

"I've seen Madame Rougon," said the sub-prefect. "She is very troubled."

"Her son-in-law has always been a trouble to her," Monsieur de Condamin interrupted unsympathetically. "I met Mouret at the club, the other day. He beat me at picquet. I found him as intelligent as usual. . . . The good man never was a shining light, of course."

"I did not say that he was mad, as the vulgar understand the word," continued the doctor, who thought he was attacked. "Nor am I saying that it is safe to leave him at large."

This declaration made something of a stir. Instinctively Monsieur Rastoil surveyed the wall separating the two gardens. All faces were turned towards the doctor.

"I once knew a lady," he went on, "a charming person, who kept a very good house, gave dinners, received quite distinguished people, and talked herself with great wit. Well, as soon as this lady

retired to her bedroom, she used to lock herself in, and spend some part of the night scrambling round the room on all fours, barking like a little dog. For a long time her people thought that she was hiding a little dog in her room. This lady was an example of what we doctors call lucid insanity."

Abbé Surin had to restrain his giggles as he looked at the Demoiselles Rastoil, for they were much diverted by this story of a lady-like person acting like a dog. Dr. Porquier solemnly wiped his nose with a handkerchief.

"I could quote twenty other such cases," he added, "of people appearing to enjoy full reason, and indulging in the most extravagant practices when left to themselves. Monsieur Bourdeu certainly knew a marquis, whose name I will not mention, living at Valence——"

"He was an intimate friend of mine," said Monsieur de Bourdeu; "he often used to come and dine at Government House. His story created a great sensation."

"What story?" asked Madaine de Condamin, when she saw that the doctor and the ex-prefect were silent.

"The story is not very nice," said Monsieur Bourdeu, with a laugh. "The marquis, whose brain, he it said, was not of the best, used to spend entire days in his study, where he said he was busy writing a long book on political economy. Well, after ten years, it was discovered that he had been busy making little balls, exactly equal in size, with——"

"With his excrement," concluded the doctor, in such a grave voice that the word passed and did not even make the ladies blush.

"I," said Abbé Bourrette, who found these anecdotes just as amusing as fairy stories, "I once had a very peculiar penitent. She adored killing flies. She couldn't see a fly without feeling an irresistible desire to catch it. In her room she used to string them on darning needles. Then, when she came to confession, she used to weep bitterly. She said she was guilty of killing the poor things; she said she was damned. I never succeeded in amending her ways."

The priest's story had quite a success. Even Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies and Monsieur Rastoil deigned to smile.

"There's no great harm done when the victims are only flies," observed the doctor, "but lucid madmen are not always as harmless as that. There are those who torture their families with some hidden vice which has developed into mania: wretches who drink, who indulge in secret debauchery, or steal because they must; others suffer agonies of pride, jealousy or ambition. And they are so

successful in hypocritically concealing their madness, that they can watch themselves, carry out the most complicated schemes, answer quite sensibly, so that no one suspects their cerebral lesions; then, when in the intimacy of their families, when alone with their victims, they give way to their delirious ideas, change into torturers. They don't murder; they kill by slow degrees."

"And Monsieur Mouret?" asked Madame de Condamin.

"Monsieur Mouret has always been a nagger, a restless despotic man. The lesion appears to have become more marked with age. Today I have no hesitation in classing him among the aggressive madmen. . . . I once had a lady patient who used to shut herself up as he does in a lonely room, and spend whole days hatching out quite abominable actions."

"But, doctor, if that is your opinion, then something should be done!" cried Monsieur Rastoi!. "You ought to make a report to the proper authority."

Dr. Porquier was left slightly embarrassed.

"We're talking between ourselves," he said, producing the smile that he handed out to lady patients. "If I am called, if things take a serious turn, I shall do my duty."

"Tut," said Monsieur Condamin, concluding maliciously, "the maddest people are not those one thinks. No brain is sound for the alienist. The doctor has just given us a page from a book on lucid insanity which I happen to have read; it's as interesting as a novel."

Abbé Faujas had taken no part in the conversation, but he had been following it with great interest. Then, as the talk died down, he remarked that stories about madmen were not very cheerful for the ladies; he suggested a change of subject. But curiosity was awake now; both groups began to watch Mouret in his merest comings and goings. He went out into the garden now for only one hour in the day, when the Faujas family were sitting on at table with his wife. He could not stop at a vegetable patch, show interest in a lettuce, or make a single gesture without giving rise to the most unfavourable comments in either garden, right and left. Everyone was turning against him. Monsieur de Condamin was the only one who still stood up for him. But one day, at lunch, the beautiful Octavie said:

"What does it matter to you whether Mouret is mad or not?"

"To me, my dear? Why, not at all," he answered in surprise.

"Very well, then, let him be mad, since everyone tells me he is mad. I don't know why you are so set on holding an opinion

contrary to your wife's. It won't do you any good, my dear. So please have the wit, in Plassans, not to be witty."

Monsieur de Condamin smiled.

"You are right, as you always are," he said gallantly. "You know that I have put my fortunes in your hands.—Don't expect me to dinner. I'm riding over to St. Eutrope, to have a look at some wood-felling."

And off he went, chewing a cigar.

Madame de Condamin was quite aware that there was a weak spot in his heart for a little girl living out St. Eutrope way. But she was tolerant; she had even saved him twice from sequels to very unpleasant little episodes. As for him, he felt no qualms about his wife's virtue: he knew that she was far too wide-awake to have any intrigue in Plassans.

"Now you'd never guess how Mouret spends his time when he's shut up in his room," said Monsieur de Condamin next day, when he went to Government House. "Well, he's counting the s's in the bible. He's afraid of making a mistake in the total and has already been through it three times. My word, how right you were, he's completely cracked, the old joker."

And from then on, Monsieur de Condamin piled a terrible load on Mouret. He even carried things too far; using his imaginative gifts in concocting preposterous tales which left the Rastoil family dazed. Monsieur Maffre was his favourite victim. He told him that he had seen Mouret standing naked at one of the front windows of his house, with nothing on but a woman's bonnet, bowing to the air outside. Another day he told him with the most surprising self-possession that he was sure he had met Mouret nine miles out from town, dancing in the middle of a wood like a savage. Then, as the police magistrate seemed incredulous, he got quite annoyed and said that Mouret could easily leave the house without being noticed, by climbing down a drain-pipe. The audience at Government House listened to all this with smiles, but the next day the Rastoil's servant was spreading extraordinary tales through the town, where the legend of the wife-beater was now growing to grandiose dimensions.

One afternoon Aurélie, the elder Mademoiselle Rastoil, said with a blush, that about midnight on the previous evening she had gone to her window, and there was the neighbour walking about in his garden with a tall candle. Monsieur de Condamin thought that she must be pulling his leg, but she gave precise details.

"He was holding the candle in his left hand. He knelt down on the ground; then he moved about on his knees, sobbing."

"Perhaps he has committed a crime and buried the body in his garden," suggested Monsieur Maffre, looking white.

So then both groups agreed to watch one evening, until midnight if necessary, to clear up the mystery. The following night a watch was kept in both gardens, but Mouret did not appear. Three evenings were wasted in this way. Government House gave up; Madame de Condamin was saying that she would not wait under the chestnut trees, where it was dreadfully dark, but then, on the fourth night, under an inky-black sky, a light was seen to flicker on the Mouret's ground-floor. Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies was warned and slipped down Chevillottes Lane himself, to ask the Rastoil family up to the terrace outside his mansion overlooking the next door garden. The judge, who was on watch with his daughters behind his cascade, hesitated a moment, reflecting that, politically speaking, he was pledging himself rather far if he went like this to the Government grounds. But the night was so dark, and his daughter Aurélie was so anxious to prove her story true, that he followed Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, treading softly through the darkness. And this was how for the first time ever the Legitimist party walked into the territory of the Bonapartist faction, in Plassans.

"Don't make any noise," urged the sub-prefect; "lean over the balustrade."

Monsieur Rastoil and his daughters found Dr. Porquier already there, with Madame de Condamin and her husband. The darkness was so intense that they greeted one another without seeing faces. Meanwhile, all held their breath. Mouret had just appeared on his little terrace, with a candle in a large kitchen candlestick.

Deep silence followed. Mouret by now had stepped over the box edging and knelt down among his salads. He held the candle low, and began hunting along the furrows and under the spreading leaves. Every now and then he gave a little grunt; he seemed to be squashing something and poking it into the earth. This went on for nearly half-an-hour.

"He's crying; I told you so," Aurélie kept whispering complacently.

"This is really quite frightening," murmured Madame de Condamin brokenly. "Let's go indoors, please."

Mouret let his candle fall. It went out. His annoyance was audible. Then he returned to the terrace, stumbling up the steps. The Demoiselles Rastoil gave two little shrieks, and could only be reassured when safely inside the small lighted drawing-room, where Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies insisted on giving the company cups of tea and biscuits. Madame de Condamin was still all of a quiver and snuggled down in the corner of a divan. She protested, with a tearful smile, that she had never felt such a sensation, not even on the morning when shameful curiosity had made her go and see a capital execution.

"It's curious," said Monsieur Rastoil, who had just been deep in thought, "but Mouret looked as though he was hunting for slugs under his lettuces. Gardens are pestered with them, and I would go so far as to say that they can only be dealt with successfully at night."

"Slugs?" cried Monsieur de Condamin. "Come, he wasn't slug-hunting. Do you hunt slugs with a candle? I prefer to think, like Monsieur Maffre, that at the bottom of it all, we have a crime. I suppose Mouret never had a servant who disappeared? There ought to be an enquiry."

Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies guessed that his friend, the Keeper of Woods and Waters, was drawing the long bow.

"No, no, my friend," he said, after drinking a mouthful of tea. "He's crazy, he's afflicted with extraordinary ideas, that's all. Even so, it's terrifying enough."

He took the plate of biscuits and handed it to the Demoiselles Rastoil, bending his fine military figure at the waist. Then, setting the plate down, he went on:

"And to think that this unhappy man used to have a hand in politics! I don't wish to reproach you for joining forces with the Republicans, my dear judge, but you will admit that the Marquis of Lagrifoul had a very strange partisan in Mouret."

Monsieur Rastoil's face had become very grave indeed. He made a vague gesture, and did not reply.

"And he still takes a hand in it; perhaps it's politics that turned his head," said the lovely Octavie, as she daintily wiped her lips. "He is said to be very keen about the next election, isn't he, dear?"

She was speaking to her husband, at whom she glanced.

"And that will certainly finish him off!" cried Monsieur de Condamin; "he's going about telling everyone that he is the boss of the ballot, that he will have a shoemaker candidate if he thinks fit."

"You're exaggerating," said Dr. Porquier; "he's losing influence, now the whole town thinks he's a joke."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong! If he wants, he will lead all the old quarter of the town and quite a number of the villages to the ballot-box. He's mad, that's true, but it's a recommendation. I consider him still quite reasonable, for a Republican."

This second-rate joke scored a great hit. The Demoiselles Rastoil themselves giggled like schoolgirls. The presiding judge condescended with an approving nod; emerging from his solemnity, and without looking at the sub-prefect, he said:

"Lagrifoul has perhaps not given us the help that we had the right to expect, but a shoemaker, really, what a disgrace that would be for Plassans!"

Then he quickly added, as if to cut things short after his last comment: "It's half-past one: this is a debauch. Monsieur le sous-préfet, we owe you very many thanks."

It was Madame de Condamin who found the last word, as she threw a shawl round her shoulders:

"Well, we can't leave election-running to a man who goes and kneels in his lettuce-bed after midnight."

This night became an old wives' tale. Monsieur de Condamin had an enjoyable time of it telling the story to Monsieur Bourdeu, Monsieur Maffre, and the priests who had missed seeing Mouret with his candle. And three days later, the whole quarter could have sworn that they had actually seen the mad wife-beater walking about with his head wrapped up in a sheet. In the harbour, during Tuesday gatherings, the chief topic was the possibility of Mouret's shoemaker running as candidate. There was laughing; everybody eyed everyone else; it was a way of feeling the other fellow's political pulse. Monsieur de Bourdeu was led to understand, from certain confidences made by his friend the presiding judge, that a tacit understanding over his name might be possible between the

Government party and the moderate opposition, so as to inflict a crushing defeat on the Republicans. Accordingly he now became more and more sarcastic in his references to the Marquis of Lagrifoul, and was careful to point out any and all of his follies in the Chamber. Monsieur Delangre, who came at rare intervals now, alleging that public affairs were making heavy calls on his time, gave knowing smiles whenever he heard these contemptuous remarks from the ex-prefect.

"You can bury the marquis now rector," he said in Abbé Faujas' ear.

Madame de Condamin, who overheard this, turned her head; and laid a finger on her lips, pouting with the most delicious malice.

Abbé Faujas now seemed quite agreeable that politics should be talked in his presence. And sometimes he even expressed an opinion, declared for the union of all upright and religious-minded people. Everyone endorsed this heartily—Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaics, Monsieur Rastoil, Monsieur de Bourdeu, down to Monsieur Maffré. How easy it should be for all right-minded people to come to an understanding, to work together for the consolidation of those great and essential principles, without which society cannot exist! Then the conversation turned to property, the family, religion. Sometimes Mouret's name would crop up, and Monsieur de Condamin would murmur:

"I tremble when I let my wife come here, you know. I'm afraid, really. You'll see some queer things at election time, if he is still at large!"

Meanwhile, every morning, Trouche was trying to scare Abbé Faujas in conversations which they seemed to be having regularly just now. He gave him quite alarming news: the workmen in the old quarter were taking a good deal of interest in Mouret's house; they were talking of coming to see the man, to judge of his condition, and hear his opinion.

As a rule Abbé Faujas merely shrugged his shoulders. But at last, one day, Trouche came out of the priest's room fairly beaming. He hugged Olympe and cried:

"We've done it this time, girlie!"

"He's allowing you to act!"

"Yes, a completely free hand. How nice and cosy we shall be, when the old chap's gone!"

She was still in bed; she snuggled deeper under the blankets and did carp-leaps, laughing like a child.

"Lordy! It's all ours, now, isn't it? I shall take another room. And I want to go in the garden, I want to cook downstairs. Yes, my brother certainly owes us that! You must have given him a grand leg up!"

That evening Trouche arrived only about ten at the dive where he had his meetings with Guillaume Porquier and other good class chaps in the town. They chaffed him about this late arrival, taxed him with going on the ramparts with one of the bits from the Hospice of the Virgin. As a rule he found this joke flattering, but on this night he took it gravely. He said that he had had business, important business. It was only towards midnight, when he had emptied several flasks from the counter that he thawed and became expansive. He spoke very familiarly to Guillaume, and began stammering, leaning back on the wall and relighting his pipe after each sentence.

"I saw your dad tonight. He's a good chap. I needed a document from him. He was very decent, very decent. He gave it to me. It's here in my pocket. Ah, at first he didn't want to. He said it was for the family. I said to him: 'But I am one of the family. I've got orders from the mother.' You know the mother, you do. You go to her place. A good woman. She seemed very pleased when I told her about it, beforehand. So then he gave me the document. It's there, inside my pocket; you just feel."

Guillaume looked steadily at him, concealing his great curiosity with a sceptical laugh.

"I'm not lying," the drunkard went on; "the paper's in my pocket. You felt it there, didn't you?"

"It's a newspaper," said the young man.

With a jeering laugh, Trouche took a large envelope out of his overcoat and laid it on the table among the cups and glasses. He guarded it a moment, as Guillaume's hand came across the table; then he let him take it, laughing still louder, as if someone had tickled him. It was a declaration signed by Dr. Porquier, and a very detailed one, about the mental condition of a certain François Mouret, house-owner, of Plassans.

"So they're going to lock him up?" asked Guillaume, handing back the paper.

"That's none of your business, my lad," answered Trouche, who had turned suspicious. "It's for his wife, that paper. I'm only a friend, I am, pleased to do a favour. She can do what she likes. Still, she can't let herself be murdered, poor lady."

He was so drunk that, when they turned him out of the café, Guillaume had to escort him all the way to Balande Street. He wanted to lie down on every bench in Sauvairé Place. When he got to Government Square, he sobbed and kept saying: "The pals aren't there, it's because I'm poor, I'm so looked down on. But you're a good chap. You shall come and have coffee with us, when we're our own masters. If the priest's in our way, we'll send him off to join the other chap. He's no great shakes, the priest, with all his grand airs; I make rings round him. You're a pal, you are, a real pal, eh? Old Mouret's had it, we'll drink his wine."

After depositing Trouche at his door, Guillaume walked through the sleeping town and went to whistle softly outside the police-magistrate's house. This was a signal. The Maffre boys, whom their father locked into their bedroom each night with his own hand, opened a window on the first floor. Then they climbed down, with the help of bars barricading the ground floor windows. Every night they went off like this to a den of vice, in the company of young Porquier.

"Ah, good," he said to the other two, when they had walked in silence into the dark alley-ways by the ramparts, "we should be very foolish to stint ourselves. If my father talks again of sending me off to do penitence in some god-forsaken hole, I've got something I can say to him now. Would you like to bet that I get my admission ticket to the Youth Club when I like?"

The Maffre boys took the bet. All three then slipped into a house painted yellow with green shutters, standing against a corner in the ramparts, at the end of a blind alley.

The following night Marthe had a frightful attack. In the morning she had attended a long religious ceremony which Olympe wanted to see to the very end. When Rose and the tenants hurried down, hearing her piercing screams, they found her lying at the foot of the bed with her forehead split open. Mouret was on his knees among the blankets, shivering.

"This time, he's killed her!" cried the cook.

And she took him in her arms, though he was only in his shirt, pushed him out of the room and across to the door of his bureau, on the other side of the landing; then she brought a mattress and blankets and threw them in after him. Trouche had run off to fetch Dr. Porquier. The doctor treated Marthe's wound. A very little lower, he said, and the blow would have been fatal. Downstairs in the hall, in the presence of them all, he said that action

must be taken, that the life of Madame Mouret could no longer remain at the mercy of a dangerous madman.

Marthe had to stay in bed next day. She was still slightly delirious; she kept seeing an iron hand cleaving her skull with a flaming sword. Rose absolutely refused to let Mouret into the room. She gave him his lunch in the bureau on the dusty table—he ate nothing. He was looking stupidly into his plate when the cook brought three gentlemen dressed in black into the room.

"Are you the doctors?" he asked. "How is she?"

"She's better," one of the gentlemen answered.

Mouret cut a slice of bread mechanically, as if he was about to eat.

"I wish the children could have been here," he muttered. "They would have looked after her, we should be less alone. It's since the children went that she's been ill. I'm not well myself, either."

He had raised a piece of bread to his mouth, and great tears were running down his cheeks. The person who had already spoken then said to him, after glancing at his two companions:

"Would you like us to go and fetch your children?"

"I certainly would!" cried Mouret, getting up. "Let's go at once."

On the staircase he did not notice Trouche and his wife leaning over the banisters on the second floor, watching with burning eyes as he went down each step. Olympe hurried down after him, flung herself into the kitchen, where Rose was watching through the window, in a great state. And when a van waiting at the door had taken Mouret away, she flew to the top of the house, put her hands on her husband's shoulders and made him dance round the landing, bursting with joy.

"Packed off!" she cried.

Marthe stayed in bed for a week. Her mother came to see her every afternoon, and was extraordinarily kind. The Faujas and the Trouches took turns by her bedside. Madame de Condamin herself came to see her several times. No one mentioned Mouret. Rose explained to her mistress that he had had to go to Marseilles. But when Marthe was able to go downstairs for the first time and sit up to table in the dining-room, she expressed surprise and asked for her husband with some signs of uneasiness.

"Come, dear lady, don't worry yourself, or you'll take to your bed again," said Madame Faujas. "Your friends were forced to put their heads together and act in your interests."

"You can't regret him," exclaimed Rose crudely, "after that blow he gave you on the head with a stick. The whole neighbourhood's sighing with relief now that he's gone. They were always afraid he would set fire to the house or run out into the street with a knife. I was hiding all the knives in the kitchen, Monsieur Rastoil's servant, too. And your poor mother, so near to death's door! Yes, the people who came to see you while you were ill, all the ladies, all the gentlemen, when I was showing them out, didn't they say to me: 'It's good riddance for Plassans. A town's always on the jump when a man like that is free to come and go.' "

Marthe listened to this flood of words with eyes opened wide, horribly pale. She had let her spoon drop; she was looking straight in front of her through the open window as if some vision rising up from behind the fruit trees in the garden had terrified her.

"Les Tulettes! Les Tulettes!" she stammered out, veiling her eyes with quivering hands.

She was throwing herself back, stiffening already in a hysterical fit when Abbé Faujas, who had finished his soup, took her hands, clasped them firmly, and murmured in his gentlest tones:

"Be strong in this trial sent to you by God. He will grant you consolation if you do not rebel. He will lay up happiness for you as you deserve."

Under the pressure of the priest's hands, under the soft fall of his words, Marthe revived and sat up again, with burning cheeks.

"Oh yes!" she said, sobbing. "I have great need of happiness, promise me great happiness."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE general election was going to take place in October. A few weeks before, about the middle of September, the bishop had a long conversation with Abbé Faujas, and then suddenly left for Paris. A sister of his, living at Versailles, was seriously ill, people said. Only five days later, the bishop was back again. And there he was, comfortably ensconced as usual in the deep armchair in his study, snugly wrapped in a quilted cloak of purple silk, though the weather was still very warm. Abbé Surin was reading to him, and the bishop listened with a smile as the young priest amorously chanted the stanzas of Anacreon in his effeminate voice.

"Good, good," he murmured, "you have all the music of that lovely language."

He glanced at the clock uneasily.

"Has Abbé Faujas been here already this morning?" he asked.

"Ah, my child, the cares of this life! I still have the abominable din of the railway in my ears. And in Paris it rained all the time! I had visits to make here, there and everywhere, and saw nothing but mud."

Abbé Surin laid Anacreon down on a side-table.

"Is your lordship satisfied with the results of your journey?" he asked, with the familiarity of the spoilt child.

"I know what I wanted to know," answered the bishop, now wearing his subtle smile again. "I should have taken you with me; you would have learned things worth knowing for a young fellow like you, marked for episcopal honour by his birth and connections."

"I am listening, your lordship," said the young priest with an imploring look. But the prelate shook his head.

"No, no, such things can't be said. Be friendly with Abbé Faujas, he might be very useful one day. . . . I was given the fullest information."

Abbé Surin clasped his hands in such a coaxing way, so eloquently curious, that his lordship just had to continue:

"Well, there had been trouble at Besançon. He was in Paris, very poor, living in a humble room. He went and offered his services. As it happened, the minister was looking round just then for priests devoted to the Government cause. I understand that he was appalled at first by the priest's dark looks and the frayed cassock. He was only sent here on the off chance. . . . Yes, the minister was very nice to me."

At the end of his sentences the bishop was using a gentle wave of his hand as he quested the right word, afraid of saying too much. Then his affection for his secretary got the better of him. He added quickly:

"Yes, mark what I say, you should make yourself useful to the rector of St. Saturnin; he is going to need help from everyone; he seems to me a man who forgets neither wrongs nor favours. But don't bind yourself to him. He will come to a bad end. That is my personal impression."

"A bad end?" the young priest echoed in surprise.

"Oh, at the moment he's on the crest of the wave. It's his face that troubles me, child; he wears a terrible mask. That man won't die in his bed. . . . But you had better forget all this; don't start compromising me. All I ask is to live in peace; my only need now is rest."

Abbé Surin was picking up his book again, but Abbé Faujas was announced. Bishop Rousselot went to meet him with a laughing face and hands held out. "My dear rector," he said. "Leave us, my child," he remarked to his secretary, who withdrew.

He talked of his journey. Yes, his sister was better; he had been able to shake hands again with old friends.

"And did you see the minister?" asked Abbé Faujas, looking steadily at him.

"Yes, I thought I owed him a visit," replied the bishop, who felt he was blushing. "He spoke very highly of you."

"So then—you no longer have doubts, you trust yourself to me?"

"Entirely, my dear rector. Besides, I understand nothing about politics; I leave you master."

They talked together the whole morning. Abbé Faujas got him to agree to making a tour of the diocese; he would go with him, prompt his every word. It was desirable also to summon all the deans, so that priests of the smallest parishes could receive instructions. There was no difficulty here; the clergy would obey. The most delicate task was in Plassans itself, in the St. Mark quarter.

The nobility, cooped inside old stone walls, were quite beyond the reach of the priest; so far he had only been able to work on the ambitious royalists, the Rastoils, the Maffres and Bourdeus. The bishop promised to sound certain drawing-rooms in the quarter, where he was received. Besides, even admitting that the nobility voted the wrong way, they would only make a tiny minority, if the middle class clericals deserted them.

"And now," said Bishop Rousselot as he rose, "it would perhaps be as well if I knew the name of your candidate, so that I can dot the i's."

Abbé Faujas smiled.

"A name is dangerous," he said. "If we mentioned our candidate now, there would be nothing left of him in a week but shreds. The Marquis of Lagrifoul has become impossible. Monsieur de Bourdeu, who is expecting to stand, is still more impossible. We will let them demolish each other; we shall only step in at the last moment. You need only say that a purely political choice would be regrettable, that what we need, in the interests of Plassans, is a man chosen outside all parties, thoroughly conversant with the needs of the town and the department. You can even hint that such a man has been found, but go no further."

The bishop smiled in his turn. He went back to the priest, just as he was taking his leave.

"And what about Abbé Fenil?" he asked. "Aren't you afraid that he might butt in and thwart all your plans?"

Abbé Faujas shrugged his shoulders.

"He has given no sign of life," he said.

"Just so," said the prelate. "This very quiet disguises the fact that Fenil, he is the firmest hater in my diocese. He may perhaps forget the pleasure of beating you in the political field, but he sure that he will take revenge as man to man. He must be waiting for his lair."

"Tut!" said Abbé Faujas. "I don't see him doing me any harm."

Abbé Surin had just come in. When the name of St. Simon had gone, he greatly cheered his lordship by announcing discreetly:

"Supposing they devoured each other. Then the only left two tails?"

The electoral campaign was about to begin. Plassans was quite calm by political means, was showing no sign of a slight temperature. An invisible mouth seemed to be holding the

through the quiet streets. The Marquis of Lagrifoul, who lived in a large outlying village, had taken up residence a fortnight since with a relation, Count de Valqueras, whose mansion occupied a prominent corner in the St. Mark quarter. He was now to be seen walking in Sauvaire Place, going to St. Saturnin, greeting influential people, without improving however on his sour aristocratic demeanour. But these efforts to be friendly, which had worked once, did not seem to be meeting with much success. Unfavourable criticism, coming no one quite knew whence, was rife and growing stronger with each day: the marquis was so deplorably incompetent; with a better man in, Plassans would long ago have had its branch line joining the railway to Nice; lastly, when any son of the local hills went to see the marquis in Paris, he was lucky to get any help after three or four visits. Still, though the chances of the outgoing deputy seemed seriously affected by such criticism, no other candidate had so far entered the arena officially. There was talk of Monsieur de Bourdeu, but people added that a majority would be very difficult to win with his name; he was only a former prefect of Louis-Philippe, with no real ties anywhere. The fact was that some unknown influence had just completely upset forecasts for the various party groupings in Plassans, by smashing the alliance between the Legitimist Royalists and the Republicans. What reigned at the moment was general uncertainty, an annoying muddle, and a wish to get the election over as quickly as possible.

"The majority's floating," political wiseacres kept saying on Sauvaire Place, "and the question is how it will concentrate."

In all this fever and swirl, the Republicans in the town decided to have their own candidate. They chose a master hatter, one Maurin, a very popular man with the workers. Trouche, active in the cafés at night, thought Maurin pretty feeble; he suggested one of the December exiles, a wheelwright from Les Tulettes, who had the good sense to refuse. Trouche in fact was giving himself out to be an ardent Republican. He would have come forward himself, he said, if his wife's brother had not happened to be with the cassock fraternity; much to his regret he was forced to eat the godly one's bread, which compelled him to keep in the shade. He was one of the first to spread unpleasant rumours about the Marquis of Lagrifoul; he also advised a break with the Royalists. The Republicans in Plassans were very few, and must take a beating. But by far the best scoring-point with Trouche was his accusation that the Government clique and the Rastoil clique had caused poor

old Mouret to be spirited away, in order to deprive the democratic party of one of its staunchest members. On the evening when he launched his accusation, in a little Cluckett Street bar, the people listening there looked rather oddly at each other. Now that Mouret was under lock and key, the gossips in the old town, who had sobbed over "the mad wife-beater", were beginning to whisper that Abbé Faujas had wanted to get an inconvenient husband out of the way. So Trouche then repeated his story every evening, banging his fist along the café tables with such conviction that he finally imposed a legend in which Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies played a very strange part indeed. There was a complete revulsion of popular feeling about Mouret. He was a victim of politics, a man whose influence was so much feared that his home now was a hut in the asylum at Les Tulettes.

"You let me settle my business," said Trouche, with a confidential air. "I'll serve them up nicely, all these blasted saintly damdest pretty stories I'll tell about their Hospice of the Virgin, where the women arrange rendezvous!"

Meanwhile Abbé Faujas was here, there and everywhere. During recent days he always seemed to be about in the streets. He was more careful with his appearance, did his best to wear a friendly smile. Now and then his eyelids would be lowered to screen the sombre flame of his glance. Often, patience gone, tired with the petty jostlings of the day, he used to return to his bare room, fists clenched, shoulders heaving with wasted power, yearning for some giant to strangle for sheer relief. Old Madame Rougon, whom he still saw in secret, was his good genius; she lectured him so well, keeping his great body bowed on a low chair before her, telling him again and again that his manner must be pleasing, that he would spoil everything if he foolishly bared the wrestler's arm. When he was master, he could take Plassans by the throat and strangle it, if that would content him. Certainly she did not spare Plassans, a town that she did not forgive her first husband for leaving, and had kept bursting with envy ever since the day when he

"It's I who wear the cassock," she used to say to him with a smile; "you look more the police sergeant, my dear man."

Often and often the priest was seen in the neighbourhood of the Youth Club. He listened indulgently while the young men talked politics, nodding his head and saying that the priest's popularity was growing. One evening he was seen at the billiards, and showed remarkable skill.

accepted a cigarette, and the club took his advice on every matter. What finally completed the picture of a really tolerant man was the good-natured way in which he pleaded for Guillaume Porquier, who had renewed his application for membership.

"I've seen the young man," he said; "he came to make general confession and—well, I gave him absolution. No sin but should have mercy. If he has pulled down a few shop-signs in Plassans and incurred debts in Paris, that's no reason why he should be treated as a leper."

When Guillaume got his membership ticket, he laughed at the Maffre boys and jeered:

"Well, you owe me two bottles of champagne. You see now, the rector does anything I ask. I've got a little gadget for tickling him on the tender spot, and then how he laughs, my chicks, he just can't say no."

"All the same," remarked Alphonse, "he doesn't seem to like you very much. He's got a funny way of looking at you."

"Pooh! that's because I tickled too hard. You see: soon we'll be the best of friends."

And sure enough, Abbé Faujas seemed to take a liking to the doctor's son; he said that the poor young man needed guiding with a very gentle hand. Very soon Guillaume became the life and soul of the club; he invented games, produced a receipt for punch mixed with kirsch, debauched all the lads just out of school. His amiable vices gave him tremendous influence. While the organ rumbled over the billiard-room, he drank his beer, surrounded by the sons of all the best families in Plassans, telling them indecent stories which made them loudly guffaw. So the club gradually became a hole and corner affair, with all sorts of rascality afoot. But Abbé Faujas was deaf to it all. Guillaume described him as a long head with big ideas at work inside.

"The rector can be bishop when he likes," he used to say. "He has already refused a post in Paris; he wants to stay in Plassans, he's grown fond of the town. I should make him a deputy; he's the man for us in the Chamber! But he won't accept, he's too modest. They can ask him for advice of course when the elections come. He won't bamboozle anyone, I know."

Lucien Delangre remained the staid and sober one of the club. He showed the greatest deference to Abbé Faujas, won over all the studious lads to his side. Often he used to walk to the club with him, talking fast, then breaking off as they stepped in to the hall.

one glance was enough to send her husband out by the door. "The cabinet is sitting," the Keeper of Woods and Waters would pleasantly remark as he philosophically mounted his horse. It was Madame Rougon who had first indicated Madame de Condamin to the priest.

"She isn't yet quite, quite accepted," she explained; "she's a very clever woman behind that pretty face and those coquettish airs of hers. You can talk openly with her; in your success she will see a way to complete success for herself; she will be extremely useful to you, if you have posts and honours to give out. She has kept a good friend in Paris, who sends her all the red ribbon she wants."

And as Madame Rougon was keeping out of the front row, by a manoeuvre showing the utmost skill, the lovely Octavie thus became the most active ally of Abbé Faujas. She won over her friends and her friends' friends for him. Every morning she set out to campaign, doing wonderful propaganda just with little waves sent off at the tips of her gloved fingers. She was especially effective with the middle class wives, multiplied feminine influence ten times over, and this was exactly what the priest had felt so absolutely essential, when he first stepped into the little world of Plassans. It was Madame de Condamin who stopped the mouths of the Paloques, in their rage against the house of Mouret; she threw a piece of honey-cake to these two monsters.

"So you still can't forgive us, dear lady?" she said one day, on meeting the judge's wife. "How very wrong of you! Your friends aren't forgetting you, they're busy on your behalf, they have a surprise in store for you."

"Yes, a lovely surprise! Some death-trap, no doubt," Madame Paloque acidly retorted. "No, we've been deluded long enough; I've taken a vow to sit tight in my corner."

Madame de Condamin smiled.

"Now what would you say if Monsieur Paloque was decorated?"

The judge's wife was silent. A rush of blood turned her face to a hideous blue.

"You're jesting," she stammered out. "It's just another joke at our expense. And, and if it wasn't true, I'd never, never forgive you."

The lovely Octavie had to swear to her that nothing could be more true. The honour was certain, only it could not appear in the *Monitor* till after the elections, because the Government didn't want

look as though they were buying votes on the magistrate's. And she hinted that Abbé Faujas was not without a hand long-awaited recognition of service; he had talked about it he sub-prefect.

"When my husband was right," said Madame Paloque, looking "He's been bullying me horribly for quite a time, to make and offer apologies to the priest. But I'm so obstinate, I'd see myself dead first. But of course, if the priest is so good as the first step. . . . Oh certainly, we're only too glad to live at with everybody. We'll go to Government House tomorrow."

The next day, the Palokes were very penitent. The wife said the awful things about Abbé Fenil. And with perfect impudence told how she had been to see him one day, and in her he had talked about hurling "the entire Faujas clique" against the gates of Plassans.

"If you like," she said to the priest, drawing him aside, "I will you a note written at the vicar-general's dictation. It's about pleasant stories, I think, which he was trying to get printed in the *Plassans Gazette*."

"Does this note happen to be in your hands?" asked the

"Well, it is—that's all," she answered, not in the least disconcerted. Then she began smiling and went on: "I found it. And I remember now: above something crossed out there are two or three words added in the vicar-general's own handwriting. I can do to your honour in this, can't I? We are honest folk, we don't like to be compromised in any way."

But for three days, before she would bring the note, she pretended to have scruples. Madame de Condamin in particular had sworn to her that an official request for the retirement of Monsieur Bastoil should go through quite soon, so that Monsieur Paloque might at last take the president's seat on the bench. So then, she handed over the paper. Abbé Faujas wouldn't keep it, he took it to Madame Rougon, charging her to make use of it (keeping in the background herself), should the vicar-general show any sign of meddling in any way with the election.

Madame de Condamin also hinted to Monsieur Maffre that the mayor was thinking of decorating him and gave a definite promise to Dr. Porquier that a place would be found, acceptable for his scamp of a son. Above all, she was delightfully obliging during those intimate afternoon gatherings in people's gardens. The summer was

drawing to its close; she used to turn up in light frocks, shivering rather, risking colds just to show her arms and overcome the last scruples of the Rastoil circle. The local election indeed was really decided in the Mourets' garden arbour.

"Well, sir," said Abbé Faujas to the sub-prefect one day when both groups were gathered together, "the grand battle is about to begin."

The stage had come when, in sub-committee, one laughed at these political squabbles. People were shaking hands in the back gardens of houses and rending each other in the front. Madame de Condamin gave a keen glance at Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, who bowed with his usual good breeding, and reeled off his answer without taking breath:

"I shall stay in my tent, rector. I was fortunate enough to express my opinion to his Excellency that the Government should abstain, in the present interests of Plassans. There will be no official candidate."

Monsieur de Bourdeu turned pale. His eyelids flickered, his hands gave a little quiver of pleasure.

"There will be no official candidate!" echoed Monsieur Rastoil, very excited by this unexpected piece of news, emerging from the reserve which he had so far maintained.

"No," continued Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, "the town contains honourable men in plenty, and is quite grown-up enough to make her own choice of a representative."

He had bowed slightly in the direction of Monsieur de Bourdeu, who rose to his feet stammering:

"Oh, of course, of course."

Meanwhile, Abbé Surin had organized a game of "hunt the clout". Monsieur Rastoil's daughters, the Maffre boys and Séverin were already busy hunting the clout—the priest's own handkerchief, which he had rolled into a ball and hidden. And all the young people were prowling round their sedate elders while the priest in his falsetto voice cried:

"Warmer, warmer!"

It was Angéline who found the clout, adroitly hidden by Abbé Surin in one of Dr. Porquier's pockets, gaping open. Much laughter ensued; the choice of this hiding-place was considered a very ingenious prank.

"Bourdeu stands a chance now," said Monsieur Rastoil, taking Abbé Faujas aside. "It's very annoying. I can't tell him so, but

we shall not vote for him; he's too deeply committed as an Orleansist."

"Just look at your son Séverin!" exclaimed Madame de Condamin, breaking into their conversation. "What a great baby! He put the handkerchief under Abbé Bourrette's hat." She lowered her voice: "By the way, I congratulate you, Monsieur Rastoil. I've received a letter from Paris, which assures me that your son's name has been on the Keeper of the Seal's list; I believe he's going to be appointed deputy prosecutor at Faverolles."

The presiding judge's face flushed; he bowed. The ministry had never forgiven him for the election of the Marquis of Lagrifoul. And ever since, so ill-luck would have it, he had been unable to find a post for his son, or husbands for his daughters. He did not complain, but those tight-lipped smiles of his said a good deal.

"I was observing to you," he went on, to conceal his emotion, "that Bourdeu is dangerous. Furthermore, he is not from Plassans, he doesn't understand our needs. One might just as well re-elect the marquis."

"If Monsieur de Bourdeu still insists on standing," Abbé Faujas declared, "the Republicans will collect an imposing minority, which would create a very bad effect."

Madame de Condamin was smiling. She pretended not to understand politics; she moved away, while the priest took the judge to the far end of the harbour, where he continued the conversation in a low voice. As they came walking slowly back, Monsieur Rastoil was saying:

"Yes, you are right; he would be a suitable candidate; he belongs to no party, his name would mean general agreement. I'm no fonder of the Empire than you are, I suppose, but really it's getting childish to send deputies to the Chamber with instructions simply to harry the Government. Plassans is the worse for it; the town needs a man of affairs, a local man able to stand up for its interests."

"Warmer! Warmer!" cried Aurélie, piping.

Abbé Surin, leading the troupe, passed through the harbour, poking and ferreting.

"Cooler! Cooler!" called the young lady, much amused by their useless hunting.

But then one of the Maffre boys lifted a flower-pot, and discovered the handkerchief folded into four.

"That gaping perch Aurélie might as well have hidden it in her

drawing to its close; she used to turn up in light frocks, shivering rather, risking colds just to show her arms and overcome the last scruples of the Rastoil circle. The local election indeed was really decided in the Mourets' garden arbour.

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mouth," said Madame Paloque. "There's plenty of room there, and no one would have gone and looked for it either."

Her husband silenced her with a furious look. He was strongly against any more of this vinegary stuff. Fearing that Monsieur de Condamin might have overheard her, he murmured:

"Ah, the dear young things!"

But the Keeper of Woods and Waters was talking to Monsieur de Bourdeu. "My dear sir," he said, "your success is certain; only, when you're in Paris, take your precautions. I have it on good authority that the Government is ready to take strong measures if the opposition becomes a nuisance."

The ex-prefect looked at him very nervously, and wondered whether he was pulling his leg. Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies merely smiled, and stroked his moustache. Then the conversation became general again, and Monsieur de Bourdeu felt that everyone was mixing their congratulations on his coming success with a discretion that showed the greatest tact. He had a delicious hour of popularity.

"It's surprising how much more quickly grapes ripen in the sun," observed Abbé Bourrette, looking up at the vine-clad arbour. He had not moved from his chair.

"In the north," Dr. Porquier explained, "they often only manage to ripen them by clearing the bunches of surrounding leaves."

A discussion began about this. Suddenly Séverin's voice could be heard calling: "Warmer! Warmer!"

He had hung the handkerchief behind the garden door so artlessly that Abbé Surin found it at once. But when the young priest hid it, the group hunted through the garden without success for nearly half an hour; they had to give up. Then the priest pointed to it, lying in the middle of a border, rolled into such a beautiful ball that it looked like a white stone. This was voted the best hide of the afternoon.

The news that the Government was not sponsoring a candidate raced through the town, and produced great excitement; inevitably it caused dismay among every political group, for each had been counting on an official nomination to create a diversion that would win them the day. And now the Marquis of Lagrifoul, Monsieur de Bourdeu and Maurin the hatter looked like dividing the votes into three pretty equal parts; there would almost certainly be a second ballot, and heaven alone could tell which name would come out of that! As a matter of fact there was some hint of a fourth

candidate, but no one could put his tongue to the name exactly—a man of good will, who would perhaps be willing to bring all parties together as one. The voters of Plassans, rather frightened to feel the reins lying loose on the neck, wanted nothing better than to agree, by choosing one from their midst who would prove agreeable to all and sundry.

"The Government's making a mistake in treating us like naughty children," sharply observed the political experts among the Rotarians. "Anyone would think the town was a revolutionary hot-bed. If only the authorities had had the sense to sponsor a likely candidate, we would all have voted for him. The sub-prefect said something about giving us a lesson. Well, we're not taking a lesson. We'll find our own candidate, we'll show them that Plassans is a town of good sense, and likes its own freedom."

So then they began looking about. But the names put forward by friends or interested parties only increased the confusion. In one week, Plassans got more than twenty candidates. Madame Rougon felt worried and mystified, and went to see Abbé Faujas, feeling furious with the sub-prefect. Péqueur was nothing but an ass and a fop, a puppet, only fit to adorn an official drawing-room; he had already allowed the Government to be beaten, and now he was going to deal a final blow by his ridiculous attitude of indifference.

"Calm yourself," said the priest, smiling. "This time Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies is content to obey. Victory is certain."

"But you have no candidate!" she cried. "Where is one?"

At that, he unfolded his plan of campaign. As an intelligent woman she approved of it, but when he gave a name in confidence, she heard it with the greatest surprise.

"What!" she said. "Is he your choice? No one has ever thought of him, I can assure you."

"So I very much hope," said the priest, again smiling. "What we needed was just the candidate that no one would think of, so that all could accept him without feeling compromised."

Then he let himself go, like a man who is sure of his strength and willing to explain his purpose. "I have much to thank you for," he said. "You have saved me from many a mistake. I was looking far ahead, careless of any cords stretched across my path to break my neck. And thank God! all the petty skirmishing is a thing of the past; I shall be able to move more freely now. As for my choice, believe me, it is a good one. As soon as ever I came to Plassans, I began looking about for a man, and found no one but him. He

is adaptable, very able, very active. So far he has contrived never to lose his temper with anyone—which is not the mark of vulgar ambition. I am aware that you are not one of his friends, and it was even for that very reason that I did not take you into my confidence. But you will find how wrong you were when you see the ground he covers, once up in the saddle; he will die in a senator's robes. What finally decided me was the stories I have been told about his wealth. He is said to have taken his wife, caught red-handed, back three times, extracting on each occasion the sum of a hundred thousand francs from his good father-in-law. If that is really how he coined his money, then he's the sort of fellow who should prove very useful in Paris for certain tasks. Oh, you can look further if you like, but apart from him you will find only fools in Plassans."

"So you're really making the Government a present," said Félicité with a laugh.

She was won over. And the very next morning the name of Delangre was travelling from end to end of the town. It was the persistence of friends, people said, that had made him agree to stand. He had held out for a long time, saying that he was unworthy, that he was no politician, that Messrs. Lagrifoul and Bourdeu on the other hand had a long experience of public affairs. And then, when all protested that a deputy outside the parties was just what they needed, he had given way, but only after making his own standpoint very definite. It was to be clearly understood that he would go to the Chamber neither to attack nor even support the Government; that he considered himself solely representative of the town's own interests; that, further, he would always vote for freedom with order and order with freedom: finally, that he would remain mayor of Plassans, thus making plain to all the double role, conciliatory and administrative, that he undertook to play. These words all seemed singularly wise. That same evening, the Rotarian fans were saying and saying again: "I told you so, Delangre is the man we want. I should very much like to know what the sub-prefect will have to say, when the mayor's name tops the poll. Don't let people accuse us of voting like unwilling schoolboys, or reproach us for going on bended knee to the Government. If the Empire had one or two more shocks like this, things would go far better."

It was a train of powder. The mine was ready, one spark had proved enough. On all sides, in the three quarters of the town, in every house and family, the name *Delangre*! rose amid a chorus of

praise. He became the awaited Messiah, the saviour at eve unknown, in the morning revealed and by nightfall adored.

Down in vestries and confessionals, the name of Monsieur Delangre was muttered; it rolled through echoing naves, sounded from outlying pulpits, was administered from ear to ear like a sacrament, spread wider and wider to the outermost convents and homes. Priests bore it in the folds of their cassocks; Abbé Bourrette gave it the respectable kindness of his paunch, Abbé Surin the grace of his smile and his lordship the effeminate charm of his pastoral benediction. The ladies of good family did not tire in their praise of Monsieur Delangre; they found in him such noble character, such a fine intellectual face! Madame Rastoil was blushing still, Madame Paloque almost beautiful in her enthusiasm; and as for Madame de Condamin, she would have beaten herself for his sake with taps of her fan, she won all hearts for him by the way she tenderly shook the hands of electors who promised their votes. And lastly Monsieur Delangre thrilled the members of the Youth Club; Séverin had taken him for his hero, while Guillaume and the Maffre boys went to win hearts for him in disreputable haunts of the town. Nay, even the young minxes of the Hospice of the Virgin, as they played at cork-penny with apprentice tanners, down in deserted alleyways by the ramparts, did not fail to celebrate the merits of Monsieur Delangre.

On voting-day, the majority was overwhelming. The whole town had a hand in it. The Marquis of Lagrifoul, also Monsieur de Bourdeu, both waxing furious and crying treason, stood down. That left Monsieur Delangre alone to cope with Maurin the hatter. The hatter won the votes of fifteen hundred stiff-necked Republicans in the suburbs. The mayor swept in the country vote, the Bonapartist colony, the middle-class clericals of the new town, the chicken-hearted shopmen of the old quarter, even one or two simple-minded royalists in the St. Mark quarter, whose noble inhabitants abstained. In this way he won thirty-three thousand votes. The whole thing went with such a swing, was such a gay and gallant success that Plassans was left quite surprised on election night to find so many hearts voting as one. The town felt that it had just passed through an heroic dream, as though some mighty hand had struck the ground and called forth thirty-three thousand electors, a somewhat alarming host whose power no one as yet had suspected. The Rotarian politicians looked in bewilderment at one another, like men dumbfounded by victory.

That evening, Monsieur Rastoil's group joined Monsieur Péqueur's group for discreet celebrations in a little drawing-room at Government House overlooking the grounds. They drank tea. The day's grand triumph had fused the two groups completely into one. All members were there.

"I have never systematically opposed any government," Monsieur Rastoil wound up, as he accepted one of the shortcakes handed to him by Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies. "The bench must keep clear of all political strife. I am even ready to say that the Empire has already done great things and is destined to do others yet greater, if it keeps to the path of justice and liberty."

The sub-prefect bowed, as if this praise was meant personally for him. On the previous day Monsieur Rastoil had read the decree printed in the *Monitor*, appointing his son deputy prosecutor at Faveroles. There was also much talk about a certain marriage, just arranged between Lucien Delangre and the elder Mademoiselle Rastoil.

"Yes, everything's settled," whispered Monsieur de Condamin to Madame Paloque, who had just questioned him on the subject. "He's chosen Angéline. I think he would have preferred Aurélie. But they must have explained to him that it wouldn't be decent to marry off the younger before the elder."

"Angéline: you're sure?" whispered the malicious Madame Paloque; "I thought that Angéline had a certain likeness. . . ."

The Keeper of Woods and Waters put a finger to his lips and smiled. "Oh well, it's just a shot in the dark, eh? The bonds between the two families will be all the tighter. We're friends now, aren't we? Paloque is expecting his decoration. I find it all very good."

Monsieur Delangre was very late in arriving. He was given a regular ovation. Madame de Condamin had just told Dr. Porquier that his son Guillaume had been appointed chief clerk in the postal service. In fact, she was giving out good news all round; Abbé Bourrette was going to become vicar-general to his lordship next year, Abbé Surin in another forty years would be a bishop, and Monsieur Maffre was decorated already.

"Poor old Bourdeu!" said Monsieur Rastoil, as a last expression of regret.

"Oh, don't pity him," she cried gaily. "I'll see that he finds consolation. The Chamber wasn't in his line. What he wants is a post as prefect. Tell him they'll end by finding one for him."

The laughter increased. Lovely Octavie's delightful good humour,

the trouble that she was taking to make everyone happy in the company. She was indeed doing the honors of the prefecture; she was queening it there. She had just given Monsieur Delangre the most practical advice that he should occupy in the legislative world. She had also offered him introductions to people of high importance, which he gratefully accepted. About eleven in the evening, Monsieur de Condamin talked of lighting up the grounds. But she calmed the men's enthusiasm down, saying that it would not be right that they must not appear to be laughing at the town.

"And what about Abbé Fenil?" she asked Abbé Faujas pointedly, taking him aside into a window recess. "My mind runs to him now. Is he still giving no signs of life?"

"Abbé Fenil is a man of sense," the priest answered with a thin smile. "He has been given to understand that in future it would not be well for him to indulge in politics."

Abbé Faujas remained grave in the midst of all this triumphant celebration. Victory for him was a rugged affair. Madame de Condamin's chatter tired him; the satisfaction shewn by all those little men of vulgar ambition filled him with scorn. Standing upright, leaning against the mantelpiece, he seemed to be brooding with eyes afar. He was master now, he had no need to be false to his instincts; he could stretch out his hand if he wished, take the town and set it trembling. His towering dark figure seemed to fill the drawing-room. Gradually the armchairs moved nearer to him, formed a circle round him. The men were waiting for some word of satisfaction from his lips, the women gave pleading glances like humble slaves. But he broke up the circle roughly, left before anyone, taking his leave without wasting words.

When he got back to the Mourets' house, remaining through Chevillottes Lane and the garden, he found Marie alone in the dining-room. She was lost in a dream, sitting on a chair by the wall, looking pale and dim-eyed as she watched the smoking lamp. Upstairs, Trouche was having a party, singing something pleasantly bawdy, to an accompaniment provided by Olympia and the men tapping on the glasses with knife-handles.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ABBÉ Faujas laid his hand on Marthe's shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Why haven't you gone to bed? I told you that you were not to wait up for me."

She started, roused herself and then muttered: "I thought you would be coming back earlier. I fell asleep. I expect Rose has made some tea."

But the priest called the cook and scolded her for not making her mistress go to bed. He talked in a commanding tone to her, and would take no reply.

"Rose, let the rector have some tea," said Marthe.

"But I don't want any tea!" he cried, getting angry. "Go to bed at once. This is absurd. I am no longer my own master. Rose, give me a light."

Rose went with him to the foot of the stairs.

"You know very well, monsieur, that it's none of my doing," she said. "The mistress is very queer. Ill as she is, she can't stay one hour in her room. She must be up and about, fetching her breath, moving about just to be on the move, and doing nothing in particular. Oh, I'm the first to suffer; she's always getting in my way. Then, when she drops into a chair, she stays there quite a time. She just sits, staring straight in front of her, with a frightened look, as if she was seeing the dreadfulest things. I told her more than ten times tonight that you would be angry if she didn't go upstairs. She didn't even seem to hear."

The priest took to the stairs without answering. On the landing, outside the Trouches' room, he put his hand out as if about to bang on the door with his fist, but the singing had stopped. The sound of chairs stirring told him that the guests were about to leave. He quickly returned to his own room. Sure enough, Trouche went downstairs almost at once with two boon companions collected from under the tables in some disreputable café; he shouted on the

same. And indeed in the end he stopped talking about her illness altogether, seemed simply to be paying polite calls.

As he was leaving he met Abbé Faujas, who was on his way to St. Saturnin. And when the priest questioned him about Madame Mouret's condition, he answered gravely:

"Science sometimes can do little or nothing, but the goodness of Providence is inexhaustible. The poor lady has been badly shaken. I don't absolutely condemn her. Her chest is so far only slightly affected and, you know, the climate here is good."

He then launched into a dissertation on diseases of the chest in the parishes of Plassans. He was writing a pamphlet on the subject, not to publish it, for he was clever enough not to be learned, but to read to a few intimate friends.

"Such are the reasons," he said by way of conclusion, "that make me think that the even temperature, sweet-smelling flora and wholesome waters of our hills are a sovereign remedy for affections of the chest."

The priest listened to all this in his stern silent manner.

"You are mistaken," he said slowly. "Madame Mouret is very far from well at Plassans. Why don't you send her off to spend the winter at Nice?"

"At Nice?" the doctor repeated uneasily.

He looked at the priest a moment. Then in his agreeable manner he said:

"She would indeed be very comfortable at Nice. A change of surroundings in her present over-excited condition would be beneficial. I must advise her to make the journey. It's an excellent idea of yours, rector."

He raised his hat and went to visit Madame de Condamin; with her he took the slightest headache very seriously. The next day at dinner Marthe spoke almost violently about the doctor. She vowed that she would not see him again.

"It's he that's making me ill," she said. "Do you know what he advised this afternoon? That I should take a change of air."

"And I approve strongly," said Abbé Faujas, who was folding his serviette.

She stared at him, turning very pale, and answered in a low voice:

"So you too want to send me away from Plassans? But I would die in a strange place, far away from my usual life and the people I love!"

her husband in the evenings. "I went to church with her today; I had to pick her off the floor. You'd laugh if I told you all she spits out about Ovid; she's furious; says that he's heartless and deceived her with promises of all sorts of consolations. And my word, if you heard her talking about the Almighty! When did a church-goer talk about religion like that? You'd think God had let her down over a large sum of money! Do you know what I think? It's her husband coming and giving her feet a pull in the night."

Trouche was much entertained by all this.

"She's only got herself to thank," he answered. "If that old joker Mouret is put away, she was the one that wanted it. I know how I would fix things if I was Faujas; I'd make her as meek and contented as a sheep. But Faujas is a fool, you'll see, it will cost him dear. And listen to me, my girl, your brother isn't friendly enough with us to expect any help. How I'll laugh the day that dame puts him right under. When you're made his way, dammit, you don't bring a woman into the game."

"Yes, Ovid looks down on us too much," murmured Olympe.

Trouche now lowered his voice:

"Listen, if the dame chucked herself into some well or other with that fool brother of yours, we should be left like lords; the house would be ours. There'd be some nice pickings. That really would be a last act."

The Troupes had in fact invaded the ground-floor since Mouret's departure. First Olympe complained that the chimneys upstairs were smoking, then she had managed to persuade Marthe that the drawing-room, hitherto left unused, was the healthiest room in the house. So Rose got orders to light big fires there, and the two women used to spend days endlessly talking in front of the great blazing logs. One of Olympe's dreams was to spend life like this, nicely dressed, reclining on a divan in all the luxury of a grand apartment. She persuaded Marthe to change the drawing-room paper, buy furniture and a carpet. And then she really was a lady. She used to come downstairs in bedroom slippers and a wrap, and talk like the mistress of the house.

"Poor Madame Mouret," she used to say; "she has so much worry that she's begged me to help her. I'm looking after things for her a little—just doing a good turn, I suppose."

She had in fact contrived to win the confidence of Marthe, who in her weariness handed over the lesser cares of housekeeping to her. So Olympe now kept the keys of the cellar and cupboards, and also

paid the tradesmen. For a long time she debated whether to try and secure a footing in the dining-room as well. But Trouche dissuaded her; they would no longer be free, he said, to eat and drink as they liked. They wouldn't even dare to drink their wine neat, nor ask a friend in to coffee. But Olympe promised that she would bring her husband his share of the dessert. She used to fill her pockets with sugar and bring even candle-ends upstairs. For this purpose she stitched up big canvas pockets which she fastened under her skirt; it took her quite a quarter of an hour to empty them each evening.

"There you are, see; something for a rainy day," she used to say, as she added to the jumble of stores piled inside a trunk, which she then pushed back under her bed. "If we happened to get on the wrong side of Madame Mouret, we'd have something here to keep us going for quite a bit. I must bring up some jars of jam and pickled pork."

"You're too good, with your hiding," answered Trouche. "If I were you, I'd get Rose to bring it all up, as you're the mistress."

He had taken over the garden. He had long felt jealous of Mouret as he watched him pruning his trees, sanding his walks and watering his lettuces. He cherished the dream of having a plot of his own, where he could dig and plant as he liked. So when Mouret was gone, he invaded the garden and formed plans for upheavals and complete transformations. He began by doing away with the vegetables. He said that he had a tender heart and loved flowers. But two days with the spade were enough for him; a gardener was called in to break up the square plots on his instructions. The salads were thrown on the rubbish heap and the ground prepared for spring planting of poppies, rose trees, lilies, sowings of larkspur and convolvulus, and cuttings of pinks and geraniums. Then an idea sprang up in Trouche's mind; he suspected that the sombre funereal aspect of the plots was due to the dark hedges bordering them, and he pondered for a time over the idea of having them up.

"You're quite right," said Olympe when he consulted her, "it looks like a graveyard. Personally I'd like to have an edging of those metal branches made to imitate rustic wood. I'll talk Madame Mouret over. Have the box up anyway."

The box bushes came up. A week later the gardener was putting down the rustic edging. Trouche also did away with several fruit trees which blocked the view, had the arbours repainted in a light green, decorated the fountain with rock work. Monsieur Rastoil's

scade tempted him furiously, but he contented himself with selecting a position for a similar one "if business was good."

"That'll make the neighbours sit up and look!" he said to his wife of an evening. "They can tell that a man of taste is here now. Next summer, when we look out of the window there will certainly be a sweet smell and we shall have a pretty view."

Marthe agreed and approved every plan put before her; and indeed in the end she wasn't consulted at all. The Trouches only had to wrestle now with Madame Faujas; she went on defending the house from them inch by inch. When Olympe took over the drawing-room she had to wage a set battle with her mother who all but won the day. It was the priest who spoilt her victory.

"Your trollop of a sister is saying black things about us to Madame Mouret," Madame Faujas kept complaining. "I can see through her game, she wants to step into our shoes and have all the pleasure for herself. What's she doing now but settling in the drawing-room like a lady, the good-for-nothing!"

The priest wouldn't listen, impatiently waved her off. Then one day he lost his temper and exclaimed:

"Now please, mother, let me be. No more of this talk about Olympe and Trouche. Let them go hang if that pleases them!"

"They're taking the house, Ovid, they've got teeth like rats. When you want your share, you'll find everything gnawed away. You're the only one who can stop them."

He looked at his mother with his thin-lipped smile. "Mother, you love me much," he said quietly. "I forgive you. Be easy; I want something else than this house which is not mine, and I only keep what I earn. You will be proud when you see the part that falls to me. Trouche has been useful to me. One musn't look too closely."

So Madame Faujas had to beat a retreat. She did it with an ill grace, was sour at the triumphant laughs that Olympe sent after her. Her son's completely disinterested attitude made her despair in her peasant instincts, her rough appetites, her prudent economy. What she would have liked would have been to put the house safely by, empty and clean, to wait for the day when Ovid needed it. And so the Trouches with their long teeth gave her all the anguish of a miser despoiled by strangers; it seemed that they were devouring her goods, eating her flesh, that they were casting her out with her beloved son into the straw. When the priest forbade her to resist these gradual inroads by the Trouches, she resolved to save at least what she could from the spoils. So she began to imitate Olympe and steal

from the cupboards; she too fixed large pockets under her skirt; there was a chest that she filled with all her pickings—food, linen and lesser things.

"What's that you're hiding, mother?" the priest asked her, coming into her room one evening, being disturbed by the noise that she was making, as she pulled the chest over the floor.

She stammered out something. But her son guessed, and flew into a terrible temper.

"Shame, shame!" he cried. "So you're a thief now. And what would happen if you were caught? I should be the talk of the town."

"It's for you, Ovid," she muttered.

"A thief! My mother a thief. Perhaps you think that I'm thieving too, that I came here to steal, that my sole ambition is to stretch out my hand and take? Heavens, what sort of a man do you think I am? We shall have to part, mother, if we can't understand each other better."

These words prostrated the old woman. She had been kneeling at the chest, but now she found herself down on the floor, white, half choking, with hands outstretched. At last she found her voice.

"It's for you, my child, for you only, I swear. I told you: they're taking it all; she's taking all away in her pockets. You'll get nothing, not even a lump of sugar. No, no, I won't take another thing, since that vexes you; but you'll keep me with you, you will, won't you? You'll keep me with you?"

Abbé Faujas wouldn't make any promise, until she had restored everything that she had taken. For nearly a week he presided himself over the secret dispersal of everything in that chest; he watched her fill her pockets and waited till she came up again to make another journey. As a measure of precaution he only allowed her to make two trips each evening. The old woman nearly broke her heart over each little thing restored in this way; she did not dare to cry, but tears of regret came welling to her eyes; her hands trembled more now than when she was raiding the cupboards. What finally devastated her was the discovery on the second day that, as she replaced anything, Olympe was coming in behind and laying hands on it. The linen and food and candle-ends were merely changing from one pocket to another.

"I'm not taking anything more down," she said to her son, in revolt against this unexpected trick. "It's not worth it; your sister is simply picking it all up behind my back. Ah, the hussy! A nice little store she must have in her room! I beg you, Ovid, let me keep the

rest. It's doing Madame Mouret no harm, since it's all lost to her, anyway."

"My sister is what she is," the priest replied calmly, "but I want my mother to be an honest woman. You will be more of a help to me if you don't behave in the same way."

So everything had to be put back, and after that she nursed fierce hatred for the Trouches, for Marthe, and the entire house. She said that the day would come when she would have to defend Ovid from every soul alive.

The Trouches now reigned as masters. They completed their conquest of the house, reached in to the tiniest corners. The only place they respected was the priest's apartment. They trembled before him alone. But that did not prevent them from having bean-feasts which lasted till two in the morning. Guillaume Porquier came with gangs of quite young fellows. Forgetting her thirty-seven years Olympe smirked and simpered, and more than one boy out of school was very forthcoming with her, which made her giggle like a woman when she's tickled and likes it too. The house became her heaven. Trouche was loud with his chaff when alone with her; he pretended he had found a schoolboy's satchel under her skirts. But she wasn't annoyed at all.

"Come," she said, "don't you have a good time yourself? We're free, you know."

The truth was that Trouche had nearly spoiled this gay life of theirs by an adventure that overstepped the mark. A nun had caught him in company with the tanner's daughter, that tall fair-haired minx whom he had long kept under his eye. The girl said she wasn't the only one; others had had sweeties too. The nun knew of Trouche's relationship with the rector of St. Saturnin and was wise enough not to noise this abroad till she had seen the priest. He thanked her, and gave a hint that religion would be the first to suffer from such a scandal. The affair was hushed up; the patron ladies of the hospice heard nothing about it. But Abbé Faujas made a fearful to-do with Trouche and saw that Olympe was there, so that the wife should be armed against the husband and have a hold over him. And whenever Trouche annoyed Olympe after this, she used to say to him sharply: "You go and give sweets to the girlies."

Something else also scared them for quite a time. Though they were living on the fat of the land, with everything provided from Marthe's cupboards, they were riddled with tradesmens' debts. Trouche's earnings melted away in cafés; Olympe spent the money

extracted from Marthe by her wonderful stories on fancy purchases, and the necessities of life they invariably bought on credit. One bill which worried them extremely came from the pastry-cook in Banne Street—it amounted to more than a hundred francs—especially as the pastry-cook was a rough-tongued man who threatened to tell Abbé Faujas the whole story. The Trouches shivered in their shoes, fearing a frightful scene. But when the bill did come to him, Abbé Faujas paid without a murmur, even forgetting to reproach the pair. The priest seemed to be above such petty matters; he went on with his dark stern existence in the house they were despoiling without noticing the ravening teeth at work on the walls, the slow ruin which was gradually cracking the ceilings. Everything about him was falling into decay, while he drove straight on to the cherished ambition. He still camped like a soldier in his great bare room, allowing himself no comforts, annoyed by every attempt to pamper him. Now that he was master of Plassans, he was becoming ill-kempt again, even dirty. His hat was a rusty red, his stockings splashed with mud, his cassock, mended each morning by his mother, now was becoming like the deplorably shabby, faded garment that he had worn in his early days in the town.

"Tut! it's still quite good," he used to say when anyone about him was bold enough to say a word on the subject. And he paraded through the streets, head held high, heedless of the strange looks of passers-by. There was no bravado in all this; he was simply following his natural bent. Now that he felt there was no call upon him to be agreeable, he was returning to his disdain of airs and graces. His delight was to camp in the conquered town just as he was, with his great awkward frame, his rough ways, and clothes bursting at the seams.

Madame de Condamin was offended by the strong suggestion of the heat of battle coming from his cassock, and tried one day to scold him in motherly fashion.

"Do you know that the ladies are beginning to dislike you?" she laughingly remarked. "They say you are taking no trouble at all with your person. But before, when you pulled out your handkerchief, it seemed as though a choirboy was swinging a censer behind you."

He looked quite surprised. He had no idea of this change. But she came nearer and spoke in a friendly voice:

"Come, my dear rector, allow me to speak frankly to you. Really, it's wrong of you to neglect yourself. Your beard is unkempt, you

have forgotten to use your comb, your hair is all ruffled as if you had just been boxing. I assure you, the effect this makes is not at all good. Madame Rastoil and Madame Delangre were saying to me yesterday that they hardly recognize you. You are spoiling your success."

He burst into a laugh, a challenging laugh, shaking the tousled hair on his burly head.

"But now that's all done with; they must take me as they find me," was all that he said.

And sure enough, Plassans had to take him as he was. The supple priest was turning into a dark-faced despot, bowing every will before him. The earthy hue returned to his face, his eyes flashed like an eagle's; when his heavy hands were raised, they were full of menace and condign punishment. The town was positively terrified to see their chosen master towering even taller, filthily clothed, dingy-haired, as evil-smelling as a tramp. And if the women-folk were secretly intimidated, that only re-affirmed his power. He was cruel to his penitents and not one had the courage to desert him. They came to him, all a-tremble, privately enjoying the thrill.

"My dear," Madame de Condamin confessed to Marthe, "I was wrong in wanting him to use scent: I'm getting used to it; I even find him much better that way. He's a man!"

Abbé Faujas' power was felt most at the palace. Since the elections, Bishop Rousselot's occupation as prelate was almost gone. He just lived in his study with his beloved books; Abbé Faujas kept him actually locked in there, only allowing him to see people beyond suspicion, while he ruled the diocese from the next room. The clergy trembled under this absolute master; old white-haired priests bowed before him in ecclesiastic humility, in complete surrender of their will. Often Bishop Rousselot, shut away with his secretary, shed great silent tears; he longed for the crisp touch of Abbé Fenil, who after all used to have his caressing moments, whereas now he felt crushed down by the pressure of a never-renting weight. Then at times he would smile resignedly, and murmur with agreeable egotism:

"Come, my son, let's to work. I shouldn't be complaining; I have the life I've always dreamed of: complete solitude and books."

He sighed and went on, speaking more softly:

"I should be quite content if I wasn't afraid of losing you, my dear Surin. Presently he may not stand you here at all. Yesterday, I thought he was turning a suspicious eye on you. I beg of you, talk

his own language, be on his side, never spare me. Alas, you are all that I have now."

Two months after the election, Abbé Vial, one of the bishop's vicars-general, went away to live in Rome. Naturally Abbé Faujas gave himself the post, though it had long been promised to Abbé Bourrette. He did not even appoint Bourrette to the rectorship of St. Saturnin which he was giving up; he installed in his stead a young ambitious priest, a creature of his own.

"His lordship wouldn't hear of your appointment," he said curtly to Abbé Bourrette when they met.

And as the old priest stammered that he would see his lordship, that he would ask him for an explanation, Faujas added more gently:

"His lordship is not well enough to receive you. Rely on me, I will plead your cause."

As soon as he entered the Chamber, Monsieur Delangre had voted with the majority. Plassans was openly won over to the Empire. It even looked as though the priest had some score to pay off in his high-handed treatment of these cautious citizens, for he had the doors into Chevillottes Lane nailed up once more. This forced Monsieur Rastoil and his friends to go round by the Square to enter Government House by the official gates. And when Abbé Faujas appeared at their intimate gatherings the men were all very humble before him. And such was the fascination, the private fear of this tall slovenly man, that even when he wasn't there, no one ventured on the smallest two-handed comment.

"He's a man of high merit," said Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies who was counting on promotion.

"A most remarkable man," echoed Dr. Porquier.

And everyone nodded their heads.

In the end this chorus of praise became annoying to Monsieur de Lamoignon. Now and then he took pleasure in putting them out

reconciled with the company after having a long private conversation with Abbé Faujas.

And wishing to put everyone at their ease, the presiding magistrate went on to say:

"Do you know that there is talk of a bishopric for the vicar-general?"

At this everyone blossomed out. Monsieur Maffre felt pretty sure that Abbé Faujas would become bishop at Plassans itself, after the departure of Bishop Rousselot, whose health was failing.

"Everyone would gain thereby," naively remarked Abbé Bourrette. "Illness has soured his lordship, and I know that our excellent friend Faujas is doing his utmost to destroy certain unjust prejudices in his mind."

"He is very fond of you," Judge Paloque assured him. (The judge had just been decorated.) "My wife heard him complain of the way you had been neglected."

When Abbé Surin was there he played chorus; but, though he carried a mitre in his pocket (as the priests in the diocese had it), Abbé Faujas' success troubled him. He used to gaze at him in that pretty way of his, feeling offended by his roughness, and, remembering his lordship's prophecy, look for the cracks in the colossus that would bring him down in dust.

Meanwhile, the gentlemen in the company were satisfied—all except Monsieur de Bourdeu and Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, who were still awaiting favours from the Government. And these were just the two who were warmest in their praise of Abbé Faujas. The others, if truth were told, would have rebelled quite gladly had they dared; they were tired of the continual gratefulness exacted by the master, they yearned for the brave hand that would deliver them. And they exchanged the oddest looks, just for a second, on a certain day when Madame Paloque asked, with an air of complete unconcern:

"And what has become of Abbé Fenil? It's ages since I heard anything of him."

Deep silence fell. Monsieur de Condamin was the only one capable of treading such dangerous ground. They looked at him.

"Why," he answered calmly. "I think he's quietly immured in his property out at Les Tulettes."

And Madame de Condamin added with an ironic little laugh: "We can sleep in peace. He's done with; he won't be meddling again with the town's affairs."

then? Marthe is always complaining and you seem to be perpetually out of humour. I know very well that women can be difficult, but you must admit that you fall a little short in good will. Yes, I am really troubled; it would be so easy to get on together. So please, my dear rector, try and be more gentle."

She also scolded him amiably about his shabby appearance. Her skilful woman's instinct told her that he was overdoing success. She found excuses for her daughter: the dear child had suffered so much; her nervous sensibilities needed careful handling; besides, she was a sweet-tempered creature with a loving nature; an understanding man could do what he liked with her. And then, one day when she was explaining the best way to deal with Marthe as he liked, Abbé Faujas lost patience with this endless advice.

"No, no," he exclaimed roughly, "your daughter's out of her mind, I'm tired to death of her, I don't want to have anything more to do with her. I'd pay the fellow handsomely who took her off my hands."

Tight-lipped, Madame Rougon looked at him steadily. There was a pause, then she spoke:

"Listen, my good man, you have no tact; you're riding for a fall. Fall, if you like. In fact, I wash my hands of you. I have helped you, not for your handsome face, but to be agreeable to our friends in Paris. They wrote that I was to pilot you, so I did. But remember this: I shall not allow you to come and play the master at my house. If little Péqueur and dear old Rastoil tremble at the sight of your cassock, well and good. But my husband and I do not: we mean to remain the masters. My husband conquered Plassans before you, and we're keeping Plassans, I warn you."

From that day extreme coolness reigned between the Rougons and Abbé Faujas. When Marthe came with further complaints, her mother spoke to her outright:

"Your priest is laughing at you. You'll get no satisfaction whatever from that man. If I were you, I wouldn't hesitate to throw his four verities in his face. To begin with, he's been as dirty as a tramp lately; I don't understand how you can eat beside him."

The truth was that Madame Rougon had primed her husband with a highly ingenious plan. The idea was to oust the priest and take advantage of his success. Now that the town was voting on the right side, Rougon, who had not risked campaigning in the open, should be able to keep it on the right road. The green *salon* would only be the more powerful. From then on Félicité waited with the patient cunning to which she owed her fortune. On the day when

her mother swore to her that the priest was "laughing at her", Marthe went to St. Saturnin with a bleeding heart, resolved to make one last supreme appeal. She spent two hours there, in the empty cathedral, exhausting prayer, awaiting ecstasy, torturing herself in quest of relief. Acts of humility laid her low on the stone floor, moments of rebellion brought her to her chair, her back straight and teeth tightly clenched, and her whole being, straining forward frantically, could only grasp, could only kiss the empty void of her passion. She was shattered. When at last she got up and went outside, the sky seemed dark to her; she could not feel the pavement under her feet, and the narrow streets gave her the sensation of a lonely waste. She threw her hat and shawl on the dining-room table and went straight up to the priest's room.

The priest was sitting at his little table, thinking; his pen had dropped from his fingers. He opened the door to her, still in his thoughts; but when he saw her on the threshold, pale, with resolve burning in her eyes, he made an angry gesture.

"What do you want?" he asked. "Why have you come up? Go downstairs again and wait, if there is something you want to say to me."

She gave him a push, walked in without a word.

He hesitated a moment, fighting against the brute impulse that had already sent his hand up to use force. He remained standing, facing her, leaving the door wide open.

"What do you want?" he said again. "I am busy." On that, she closed the door. Then, alone with him, she stepped nearer. At last she said:

"I want to speak with you."

She took a chair and looked round the room, at the little bed, the simple chest of drawers, the great Christ in black wood which suddenly loomed against the bare wall and made her slightly shiver. Icy cold struck down from the ceiling. The fireplace was empty; there was not even a handful of ashes.

"You'll catch cold here," said the priest in a calmer voice. "Please, let us go downstairs."

"No, I want to talk with you," she said again.

Then she clasped her hands, like a penitent confessing: "I owe you much. Before you came, I had no soul. You it was who wanted me to be saved. Through you I found the only joy in my life. You are my saviour and my father. For five years now, I have lived only through you and for you."

Her voice was breaking, she was slipping to her knees. He stopped her with a gesture.

"Well then!" she exclaimed, "today I am suffering, I need your help. Listen to me, father. Do not forsake me. You cannot desert me like this. I tell you that God no longer hears me. I don't feel Him any more. Have pity, I beg you. Advise me, lead me towards that divine grace, whose first joys you taught me; tell me what I must do to be healed, to come nearer to the love of God."

"You must pray," said the priest gravely.

"But I have prayed, I have prayed for hours, with my head in my hands, trying to lose myself in every word of adoration, and I have not found relief, I have not felt God."

"You must pray, pray again, and still pray on, pray until God is moved and comes down to you."

She looked at him in anguish.

"Is there only prayer, then?" she asked. "Can you do nothing for me?"

"No," he answered brutally.

She raised trembling hands, in a desperate surge of emotion, her throat clotted with anger. But she controlled herself. She muttered: "Your heaven is closed to me. You led me there, only to dash my head against a wall. I was tranquil, you remember, when you came. I lived my own life without desire, without curiosity. And it was you who woke me with words that wrung my heart. It was you who led me into second youth. Ah, you can't guess what delight you gave me in the beginning. It felt like a gentle warmth inside me spreading through all my being. I could hear my heart. My hopes seemed boundless. Sometimes, at forty, it seemed so absurdly impossible, I used to smile. Then I forgave myself because I felt so happy. But now, I want to claim the rest of this promised happiness. It cannot be all. There is something more, isn't there? I tell you that I am tired of this endless, restless desire, the desire that has burned me, reducing me to agony. I must hurry now, for I no longer have my health; I do not want to be cheated. There is something else, tell me that there is something else."

Abbé Faujas remained impassive, letting this rush of burning words go by.

"There is nothing, there is nothing!" she went on in anger. "So you have deceived me! You promised me heaven on earth, on the terrace during those star-lit evenings. And I accepted. I sold myself, I handed myself over. I was beside myself, in those first tender hours

of prayer. But today that bargain no longer holds good; I intend to go back to my corner, back to my peaceful life. I shall turn everyone out, I shall tidy the house, and mend the linen in my usual place on the terrace. Yes, I used to be fond of mending. Sewing never tired me. And I want Désirée back by my side, on her little stool; she used to laugh, she used to make dolls, sweet innocent child."

She burst into sobs.

"I want my children. They were my protection. When they were no longer there, I lost my head, my life began to go wrong. Why did you take them from me? One by one they went away, and the house grew strange to me. My heart was not in it. I was happy when I left it for an afternoon; then, when I got home in the evening, it seemed to me that I was coming among strangers. Even the furniture seemed hostile and cold. I hated the house. Ah, but I will go and bring them back again, poor darlings. They will change it all, as soon as they return. Oh, if only I could drop back again into my contented sleep."

She was getting more and more excited. The priest tried to calm her in the way that had often helped before.

"Come, be reasonable, dear lady," he said, trying to take her hands and hold them firmly in his own.

"Don't touch me!" she cried, starting back. "I won't. . . . When you hold me, I am as weak as a child. The warmth of your hands makes a coward of me. And tomorrow I should need it again, because you see, my life is impossible, and you only calm me for an hour."

Gloom had come over her. She murmured:

"No, now I am damned. I shall never love the house any more. And if the children came, they would ask for their father. Ah, yes! that's what chokes me! I shall not be pardoned till I confess my crime to a priest."

She fell on her knees.

"I am guilty. That is why God's face is turned away from me."

But Abbé Faujas sought to raise her up.

"Enough!" he cried loudly. "I cannot receive your confession here. Come tomorrow to St. Saturnin."

"Father," she replied in supplication; "have pity. Tomorrow I wouldn't have the strength."

"I forbid you to speak," he cried yet more violently; "I refuse to listen, I shall turn my head away, stop my ears."

He moved back, arms stretched out, as if to stop the confession on

Madame's lips. For a moment they looked at each other in silence, in the mouldering anger of their complicity.

"It would not be a priest that heard you," he added in a voice even more subdued. "There is only a man standing here to judge and condemn you."

"A man!" she wildly repeated. "Why, but that's better! I prefer a man."

She rose from her knees, and went on feverishly:

"I am not confessing, I am telling you my fault. After the children, I let the father go. The unhappy man! He never beat me at all. I was the mad one. I felt burning sensations all over my body, I tore at myself with my nails, I wanted the cool of the tiles to calm me down. And then, after my fit, I was so ashamed to find myself with nothing on in front of everybody that I dared not speak. If you knew the horrible nightmares that flung me to the ground! All hell was whirling round in my head. And he, poor man, with his teeth a-chatter, filled me with pity. He was afraid of me. When you left the room, he didn't dare come near me. He used to spend the night on a chair."

Abbé Faujas tried to interrupt.

"You're killing yourself," he said. "Don't stir up these memories. God will account to you your sufferings."

"It was I who sent him to Les Tuileries," she continued, urgently imposing silence on him with her gesture. "You, all of you, told me he was mad. Ah, how unbearable life is! I've always lived terror-stricken at the thought of madness. When I was young, it seemed to me that someone was lifting my skull off and emptying my head. I had a sort of ice-block in my forehead. Well, that feeling of deathly cold came back to me; I was afraid of going mad, always, always!—Then they took him away. I let them do it. I didn't know where I was. But ever since that day I can't shut my eyes without seeing him, there. It's that which makes me strange, rivets me to the same spot for hours, with my eyes open. And I know the madhouse, I see it now. Uncle Macquart showed it to me. It's all grey like a prison, with black windows."

She was choking. She put a handkerchief to her lips, and when she took it away, it was stained with drops of blood. The priest, with arms tightly folded, waited for the end of the crisis.

"So now you know it all," she muttered. "I am a wretch, I have sinned for you. But give me life back, give me joy, and I will enter without remorse into the heavenly happiness which you promised me."

"You are lying," the priest said slowly. "I know nothing, I was not aware that you had committed this crime."

She stepped back in her turn, hands clasped, stammering half-words, staring at him with terrified eyes. Then she was lifted by anger, and hardly aware of what she was saying, spoke to him familiarly:

"Listen, Ovid," she said, speaking low, "I love you, and you know it, don't you? I have loved you, Ovid, from the day you came. I did not tell you so. I saw that you did not like this. But I had the feeling that you guessed what was in my heart. I was satisfied, I hoped that we could be happy one day, in union all divine. So it was for you that I emptied this house. I dragged myself on my knees, I was your servant. But you can't go on being cruel to the end. You agreed to everything, you allowed me to be yours alone, to sweep aside the obstacles that divided us. Remember this, I beg you. Now that I am ill, deserted, with my heart crushed and head empty, you can't push me away. We have never spoken of this in words, it is true. But my love was speaking and your silence was responding. It's the man I'm talking to now, not the priest. You told me that there was only a man here. The man shall hear me—I love you, Ovid, I love you, and this will be my death."

She was sobbing. Abbé Faujas had drawn himself up to his full height; he stepped nearer to Marthe, and poured out on her his scorn of woman:

"Ah, miserable flesh!" he said. "I trusted that you would have sense, that you would never sink so low as to utter this filth! Yes, this is the eternal struggle between evil and strong wills. You are the temptation from below, the baseness, the last fall. The priest has no other enemy but you; you should be driven from the churches as impure things, accursed!"

"I love you, Ovid," she muttered again. "I love you; help me."

"I have already come too near to you," he continued. "If I fall, it will be you, woman, that tears me from my strength by your desire alone. Away with you, begone, you are Satan! I will chastise you, to drive the dark angel from your body."

She let herself slip down, half-sitting against the wall, dumb with terror, as she faced the menacing fist of the priest. Her hair was coming down, a long white lock streaked her forehead. Then looking round for some help in the bare chamber, she saw the Christ in black wood, and found strength to reach her arms out to this figure in a passionate gesture.

"Don't implore the cross!" cried the priest, transported with anger. "Jesus lived chase, and that was why He knew how to die."

Madame Faujas came walking in, holding a large basket of provisions in her arm. She quickly set it down, when she saw her son in this fearful state of anger. She took him by the arms.

"Calm yourself, Ovid, my child," she murmured, stroking him. Then she turned to Marthe, lying crushed, gave her a devastating look: "Can't you let him be, then? Since he doesn't want you, at least don't make him ill. Come now, downstairs with you; it's impossible for you to stay there."

Marthe did not move. Madame Faujas had to lift her up and push her towards the door. She scolded, charged her with waiting till she was out, made her promise never to come upstairs again and upset the whole house with such scenes. Then she slammed the door on her.

Marthe tottered down the stairs. Her tears had stopped now. "François must come back," she kept saying. "François shall drive them into the street."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE Toulon coach passed through Les Tulettes, where there was a relay; it left Plassans at three. Marthe, whipped into action by her fixed idea, would not waste a minute. She put her hat and shawl on again and ordered Rose to get ready at once.

"I don't know what's taking the mistress," the cook said to Olympe; "I think we're off on a journey for a few days."

Marthe left the keys in the doors; she was in haste to be out in the street. Olympe walked beside her, vainly trying to find out where she was going and how many days she would be away.

"Ah well, don't worry," she said in her best voice, standing at the door; "I'll certainly look after everything, you'll find all in order when you get back. Take your time, see to your affairs. If you're going to Marseilles, bring us back some fresh shell-fish."

Marthe had hardly disappeared round the bend into Taravelle Street before Olympe was taking the whole house over. When Trouche came home, he found his wife busy banging doors, searching, ferreting, humming, and filling their rooms with the stolen store from her skirts.

"She's gone, and the old bitch of a cook with her!" She called to him, plumping herself in an armchair. "What glorious luck, eh, if they both got stuck in a ditch! Anyway, here we are as right as rain for a little while. Whew! it's lovely to be alone, isn't it, Honoré? Here, come and kiss me for it all. We're in our own home. We can sit in shirt and chemise if we like."

Meanwhile, Marthe and Rose just reached Sauvaire Place as the Toulon coach was starting. The coupé was vacant. When the cook heard her mistress telling the coachman that she would be getting out at Les Tulettes, she stepped into her seat with a bad grace. And hardly were they out of the town before she began her grumbling, and peevishly said:

"And here was I thinking you were going to shew some sense at

last! I thought we were going to Marseilles to see Master Octave. We could have brought back a lobster and some cockles. Oh well, I rushed it too much. You're always the same, always steering for trouble, always after turning your head upside down."

Marthe, sitting in the corner of the coupé, near to fainting, was giving way. She was overcome, mortally weak, now that she was no longer straining against the pain that was searing her chest. But the cook wasn't even looking at her.

"And what a weird notion, to go and see the master!" She went on. "A nice spectacle for you, very cheery, I'm sure. That'll mean no sleep for a week. You can be as scared as you like in the dark, but hang me if I get up to start looking under the furniture. It would be another matter if your visit was likely to do the master any good; but one look at you could be the death of him. Indeed, I'm hoping they won't let you in. It's not allowed, to begin with. You know, when you said 'Les Tulettes', I shouldn't have got into this coach at all; you wouldn't have been so crazy, I suppose, as to set off alone."

A sigh from Marthe interrupted her. She turned, saw her mistress deadly white and half choking, and got angrier still, as she lowered a window to let in some air.

"That's right, coming into my arms now, eh? I ask you, wouldn't you be far better in your bed, taking care of yourself? When I think how lucky you are, nothing but the kindest of folks around you, and not so much as thank you to the dear God. You know very well that's the truth. The rector, his mother, his sister, even Mr. Trouche, all trying to help, they would throw themselves into the fire for you, they're up all hours day and night. I saw Mrs. Olympe crying—yes, crying, last time you were ill. And how do you thank them for their kindness? By grieving them, sneaking away to see the master, knowing that it will upset them very much. For they can't feel kindly towards the master who was so hard upon you. Listen, would you like to hear what I'm thinking, madame? Marriage brought you little blessing, you came in for all the master's badness. Mind, there are days when you're as bad yourself."

She went on like this all the way to Les Tulettes, standing up for the Faujas and Trouches and accusing her mistress of all kinds of villainy. Her last remark was:

"Now they're the sort who would make nice masters, if they had the money to keep servants! But wealth only goes to hard hearts."

Marthe, who was calmer now, didn't answer. She was looking

out vaguely at the slender trees slipping past along the roadside, at the wide fields unfolding like pieces of brown cloth. Rose's grumblings were lost in the jolts of the carriage-wheels.

At Les Tulettes, Marthe walked quickly in the direction of Uncle Macquart's cottage, followed by the cook who was silent now, though her lips were tightly pursed, and she kept shrugging her shoulders.

"What! You!" cried her uncle, very surprised. "I thought you were in your bed; I was told you were ill. Well, well, my dear, you don't look very strong. Have you come to ask me for some dinner?"

"I would like to see François, uncle," said Marthe.

"François?" said Macquart, looking straight in her face. "You would like to see François? Now that's the thought of a good girl. The poor fellow has certainly been calling for you. I could see him from the end of my garden, banging the walls with his fist and shouting for you. Ah, so you've come to see him? I thought you had all forgotten him, yonder."

Big tears had come in Marthe's eyes.

"It won't be very easy to see him today," Macquart went on. "It's nearly four o'clock now. Then I don't really know if the superintendent will be willing to give permission. My nephew has been troublesome lately; he's been smashing everything. When I sent fire to the place. Ah no! madmen aren't always well behaved."

She listened, shuddering all over. She was on the point of asking her uncle some questions, but simply held her hands out to him instead.

"Please, I beg you," she said. "I've come over specially. I must speak to François today, at once. You have power in the place, you can open doors for me."

"Sure, sure," he muttered, without saying anything more.

He seemed to be in a great state of perplexity, weighing up the problem from a personal point of view to himself. He looked questioningly at the door behind him back. Finally a thin-lipped smile appeared on his face.

"Oh well, since you insist, I'll see to it. But remember, only remember, if your mother got wind of this, that I was unable to refuse you. For all that, it won't be too pleasant, I'm telling you."

When they set off, Rose flatly refused to go with them. She sat down by a fire of vine-stalks, burning in the hearth.

"I've no call to go and get my eyes poked out," she said.

"The master wasn't that fond of me. I'm staying here in the warm."

"In that case you'd be very kind to prepare us a pot of hot wine," Uncle Macquart whispered in her ear. "The wine and sugar are there, in the cupboard. We shall need it all right, when we get back."

Macquart did not take his niece in to the asylum by the main gate. He turned to the left, stopped at a small door and asked for the guardian Alexandre; with him he exchanged a few words in undertones. Then in silence all three walked along interminable corridors. The guardian led the way.

"I'll be waiting for you here," said Macquart, coming to stop in a small courtyard; "Alexandre will go on with you."

"I would have liked to be alone," Marthe murmured.

"It wouldn't be a wedding-day for you, madame," the guardian said with a quiet smile. "I'm risking a good deal as it is."

He took her through a second yard and stopped at a little door. As he softly turned the key, he said in an undertone:

"Don't be afraid. He's quieter since this morning; we were able to take off the strait-jacket. If he happens to get angry, you'll step out backwards, won't you, and leave me alone with him?"

Marthe walked in trembling, her throat dry. At first she could only see a curved hump lying against the wall in one corner. Daylight was failing, the hut was only lit like an underground cellar by the light from one barred window, boarded across.

"Hey! old chap!" Alexandre called, going over and tapping Mouret familiarly on the shoulder, "I've brought someone to see you. You'll be good, I hope."

He came back and leaned against the door, arms hanging free, keeping his eyes on the patient. Mouret had slowly raised himself. He did not seem in the least bit surprised.

"Is that you, good wife?" he said in his quiet voice. "I was expecting you, I was worried about the children."

Marthe, whose knees were failing, looked at him anxiously, reduced to silence by this affectionate welcome. Besides, he hadn't changed; in fact he looked better; he was nicely fat, his beard was trimmed, his eyes were clear. His little tricks—the tricks of the contented man of business—had reappeared; he rubbed his hands, blinked his right eye, stepped around, chatting away in the jaunty manner of the best old days.

"I'm absolutely fit, my dear. We can be getting back to the

house now. You came to fetch me, eh? And have they been looking after my patients? Those slugs are devilish fond of lettuces, the garden was eaten up with them; but I know how to kill them off. I've got all sorts of plans; you'll see. We're pretty rich, we can indulge if the fancy takes us. Tell me, do you happen to have seen old Gautier of St. Eutrope while I've been away? I bought thirty jars of wholesale wine off him for blending. I shall have to go and see him. Ah, I wouldn't give tuppence for your memory."

He was laughing, waggishly threatening her with a finger.

"I bet I'll find the whole place upside down," he went on. "You don't look after a thing; the tools lie about, the cupboards stand open, Rose throws the dust about with her broom. Yes, and why hasn't Rose come? Ah, what a head she's got! We shall never make anything of her. Would you believe it, one day she was trying to put me out of my own front door. Yes in-deed; the house belongs to her. What a joke! But come, haven't you any news for me about the children? Désirée is still with her nurse, isn't she? We'll go and give her a kiss, see if she's contented. And I want to go to Marseilles too, because I'm worried about Octave; the last time I saw him, I thought he was very dissipated. I'm not saying anything about Serge, he's much too good; he'll sanctify the whole family. . . . Yes, it's a pleasure to be talking about the house again."

And on he went, talking, talking, asking for news about each tree in his garden, dwelling on the tiniest household details, showing an extraordinary memory for a mass of trifles. Marthe was deeply touched by this niggling, affectionate interest that he was showing her, and felt how supremely tactful he was in avoiding all reproaches, the least reference to his own sufferings. She was forgiven. She vowed she would redeem her crime and become the humble servant of this man who showed such greatness in his kindly attitude; big tears silently ran down her cheeks, her knees were bending to cry him her thankfulness.

"Watch out," the guardian whispered in her ear; "I don't like the look in his eyes."

"But he's not mad at all!" Marthe muttered. "I swear to you that he's not mad! I must speak to the superintendent. I want to take him away at once."

"Mind yourself," said the guardian roughly, giving her arm a pull.

Mouret, still talking, had just spun round like a felled animal. He went flat on the ground; then he ran lightly on all fours along the wall.

"Hoo-oo-oo!" he went, in a hoarse prolonged howl.

He leapt into the air, fell over on his side. A frightful scene followed. He writhed like a worm, threshed with his fists at his face till it was blue, tore at his skin with his nails. Soon he was half naked; with his clothes in rags, he lay battered, bruised and gasping for breath.

"Out with you, madame!" shouted the guardian.

Marthe was transfixed. There *she* lay on the ground, just so *she* had flung herself on her tiled floor, torn at her face, beaten herself with her fists. She even recognized her own voice; Mouret's hoarse groans were exactly hers. It was she who had made this unhappy man.

"He's not mad!" she stammered out. "He can't be! It would be too horrible! I'd rather die."

The guardian gripped her round the middle and put her out through the door, but she stayed there, clamped against the wood. Inside the hut she heard sounds of a struggle, the screams given by a slaughtered pig; then there was a dull thud, like a soggy sheet dropping; a deathly silence followed. When the guardian came out again it was almost quite dark. Only a black hole was to be seen through the gap of the door.

"Damme!" said the guardian, still hot, "you're a funny one, you are, madame, calling out 'He's not mad!' I nearly lost my thumb between his teeth. He'll be quiet now for a few hours."

And he went on talking as he led her back.

"You can't imagine how cunning they all are here. They'll be good as gold for hours, tell you yarns that sound quite sensible; then, wallop! without a word of warning, they're at your throat. I saw all right that he was working up something when he was talking about his children. He had his eyes turned up."

When Marthe rejoined Uncle Macquart in the little yard, all that she could do was to say over and over, feverishly and without a tear, slowly, brokenly:

"He's mad! he's mad!"

"Of course he's mad," said her uncle with a sort of chuckle. "Did you expect to find him young again? He wasn't put in here just for fun. Besides, the place isn't good for the health. Two hours of it and he! he! I'd be crazy meself."

He was watching her out of the corner of his eye, watching her every nervous quiver. Then in his amiable manner he asked her:

"And now perhaps you would like to see granny?"

Marthe made a terrified gesture, hid her face in her hands.
"It wouldn't have given anybody trouble," Macquart went on.
"Alexandre would have been quite willing to oblige. She's over there, close by, and there's nothing to be alarmed about with her; she's so quiet. I'm right, aren't I, Alexandre? She's never given any trouble here. She just sits and sits staring in front of her. For twelve years she hasn't stirred. Oh well, if you don't want to see her."

As the guardian was taking leave of them, Macquart invited him to come and drink a glass of hot wine, screwing his eyes up in a certain way that made Alexandre accept. They had to support Marthe, whose legs were giving way with every step. When they reached the house they were carrying her, with face convulsed, eyes wide open, her body stiffened in one of the hysterical attacks which made her a dead thing for hours.

"There now, what did I tell you!" cried Rose when she saw them coming. "In a nice state, she is, and what a business to get her home! Is it right in Heaven's name to have such a twist in your head? The master should have strangled her; that would have taught her a lesson."

"Tut," said the uncle. "I'll lay her out on my bed. If we have to spend the night by the fire that won't kill us."

He drew back a cotton curtain screening a recess. Rose went and undressed her mistress, grumbling the while. There was nothing to be done, she said, but to put a hot brick to her feet.

"Now that she's gone bye-byes, we can have a drink," chuckled the uncle, home from the kill. "It smells devilish good, mother, your hot wine!"

"I found a lemon on the mantelpiece; I used it," said Rose.

"And you did well. There's everything in this house. When I do a rabbit, nothing's short, I can tell you."

He pushed the table near the fire, took a seat between the cook and Alexandre, and poured the hot wine into tall yellow mugs. Then he swallowed two mouthfuls, devoutly.

"By jingo!" he exclaimed, clacking his tongue, "that's good hot wine! He, he, you know something about it; it's better than mine. Before you go, you must give me the receipt."

Soothed and flattered by these compliments, Rose began to laugh. The fire of vine-stalks was glowing a generous red. The mugs were filled up again.

"And so," said Macquart, leaning his elbows on the table and looking straight at Rose, "my niece just came, on impulse, eh?"

"Don't talk to me about it," said Rose; "it would make me angry again. . . . The mistress is going crazy, like master; she doesn't know who she loves and who she doesn't love. I think she had a quarrel with the rector before setting off; I heard them raising their voices."

Uncle Macquart had a hearty laugh.

"Yet they were on the best of terms," he said.

"Why yes, but nothing lasts very long when you've got a brain like the mistress. I bet she's pining for the beatings she got from the master in the night. We found the stick in the garden."

He looked at her more closely and said, between two more mouthfuls of the wine:

"Perhaps she was coming to fetch François."

"Ah, God forbid!" cried Rose, looking alarmed. "The master would brew a fine storm in the house; he'd kill us all. Yes, that's what I fear most of all. I'm always trembling lest he should turn up one of these nights and massacre us. When I start thinking about it in my bed I can't sleep. I seem to see him climbing in at the window with his hair a-bristling and his eyes shining like candles."

Macquart was loudly amused. He banged his mug on the table.

"That would be rich, that would be rich!" he exclaimed. "He can't be loving you exactly, especially the priest, who's taken his place. He wouldn't make two mouthfuls of the priest, burly as he is, because madmen are mighty strong, so they tell. Say, Alexandre, can you see poor François dropping in at home? He'd mop things up properly. It would certainly make me laugh."

He glanced more than once at the guardian, who went on quietly drinking his hot wine, and was content to nod his agreement.

"It's only a thought, just for a laugh," said Macquart when he saw the terrified stare that Rose gave him.

At this moment Marthe began writhing frantically behind the cotton curtain; she had to be held down for a few minutes, to prevent her falling out. When she was stretched out stiff once again, like a corpse, her uncle came back and warmed his legs in front of the fire, thinking to himself, and muttering without realizing what he was saying:

"She's a bit of a nuisance, my niece."

Then suddenly he asked:

"Now, the Rougons, what have they got to say about all this business? They're on the priest's side, aren't they?"

"The master wasn't that friendly to make them regret him," Rose answered. "There was nothing too sharp for him to say against them."

"Well, he wasn't wrong there," answered Macquart. "They're stingy, the Rougons are. When you think they never would buy that cornfield out yonder there, a magnificent deal I could have seen through. . . . Félicité would pull a funny face, if she saw François back again!"

He chuckled again, and sauntered round the table. Then he relit his pipe with a business-like air:

"We mustn't forget the time, old man," he said to Alexandre, with another wink of his eye. "I'll go with you. Marthe seems quiet now. Rose can lay the table while waiting for me. I expect you're hungry, Rose, eh? Since you'll have to spend the night here, you shall have a bite with me."

He went off with the guardian. After half an hour had passed, he still was not back. The cook, bored by being alone, opened the door, leaned out over the terrace rail, watching the empty road under the clear night sky. As she was going in again, she thought she saw two dark shadows on the far side of the road; they were standing on a path behind a hedge.

"Looks like the uncle," she thought, "and he seems to be talking with a priest."

A few minutes later, Macquart came in. He said that that devil Alexandre had kept him talking and talking.

"Wasn't it you over there just now, with a priest?" asked Rose.

"Me with a priest!" he cried. "Where the dickens did you get that idea? There's no priest round here."

He rolled his shining beady eyes. Then, apparently not satisfied with his lie, he added:

"There's Abbé Fenil, of course, but he might just as well not be there; he never goes out."

"Abbé Fenil's not much," said the cook.

Macquart fired up at this.

"What d'you mean, not much? He does a lot of good round here. He's somebody, he is; far better than a lot of priests who go stirring up trouble."

Then his anger suddenly fell away. He broke into a laugh when he saw Rose looking at him in surprise.

"Much I care, anyway," he muttered. "You're right, all priests are the same, hypocrite and co. I know now whom you may have

seen me with. I met the grocer's wife; she had a black dress, you must have thought it was a cassock."

Rose made an omelette, Macquart put a piece of cheese on the table. While they were still eating Marthe sat up, with the astonished look of someone waking in a strange place. When she had swept back her hair, and remembered where she was, she jumped down from the bed, and said she wanted to leave, leave at once. Macquart seemed quite put out by this.

"It's impossible, you can't go back to Plassans tonight," he said. "You're shivering with fever, you'd fall ill on the road. Have a rest. In the morning we'll see. And in the first place, there's no coach."

"You must drive me in your trap," she answered.

"No, I won't, I can't."

Marthe, dressing in feverish haste, said that she would return on foot to Plassans, rather than spend a night at Les Tulettes. Her uncle was deliberating; he had shut the door and slipped the key in his pocket. He reasoned with his niece, threatened her, invented excuses, and meanwhile, without listening, she was getting her hat straight.

"Don't imagine you'll make her give way," said Rose, as she peacefully finished her piece of cheese; "she'd sooner go through the window. Harness your horse; that will be better."

After a short pause, Uncle Macquart shrugged his shoulders and angrily cried:

"After all what do I care! Let her be ill, if she wants to. I wanted to avoid an accident. Take the easiest way; what must happen, will. I'll drive you."

They had to carry Marthe to the trap; she was shivering in a high fever. Her uncle threw an old cloak over her shoulders. With a light clack of his tongue to his horse, they started off.

"I'm not so sorry as all that to be going to Plassans tonight," said Macquart; "quite the contrary. There's amusement at Plassans."

It was about ten o'clock. The sky, heavy with rain, had a reddish gleam that faintly lit the road. All the time as they drove along, Macquart kept leaning out, looking into ditches and behind hedges. When Rose asked him what he was looking for, he said that wolves had come down from Seille Mountain. He had recovered his good humour by now. Three miles from Plassans, rain began to fall, quite a heavy shower, and cold. At this, Macquart swore. Rose could have beaten her mistress; she was in terrible way, under the cloak. When at last they arrived, the sky was blue again.

"Are you going to Balande Street?" asked Macquart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

IN the hut at Les Tulettes it was pitch dark. An icy gust roused Mouret from the cataleptic fit which had seized him after his attack that evening. Lying in a heap by the wall he did not move for a moment, though he had opened his eyes and was slowly rolling his head on the cold stone floor, moaning like a child waking from sleep. But his legs were caught in such a damp draught of air that he stood up and stared into the darkness. Facing him was the door of his hut. It was wide open.

"She has left the door open," said the madman, aloud; "she is waiting for me; I must go."

He went out, then came back, feeling his clothes in the particular way of a tidy man who is afraid that he has forgotten something; then he carefully closed the door. He walked across the first courtyard, with the easy little steps that he took when out for a stroll. As he entered the second yard, he saw a keeper who seemed to be on watch. He stopped and thought for a moment. But as the keeper had disappeared, he soon found himself across the yard standing at another door that gave on to the country outside. He closed it behind him, showing neither surprise nor haste.

"She's a good wife all the same," he muttered; "she must have heard me calling for her. It must be getting late. I'll go home, so that they won't be uneasy at the house."

He took to a road. It seemed so natural to him to be out in the open country. After about a hundred yards Les Tulettes lay behind him, forgotten. He thought he had just come from a wine-grower after buying fifty jars of wine from him. Then he reached a point where five roads crossed, and knew where he was. He began to laugh, saying:

"I am a fool; I was heading for the plateau, St. Eutrope way; I must turn left here. In a good hour and a half I shall be at Plassans."

So then he walked along the main road cheerfully; each kilometre-stone seemed like an old acquaintance. At certain fields, at certain country-houses he stopped with an air of great interest. The sky was ash-grey, but there were long rosy streaks in it, which lit the night sky with the faint glow of a dying fire. Heavy rain-drops were beginning to fall, and a rainy wind was blowing from the east.

"The dickens! I mustn't loiter," said Mouret, anxiously scanning the sky; "the wind's in the east, and I can see a nice little soaker coming. I shall never have time to get to Plassans before it. I haven't much on, either."

And he gathered over his chest the heavy grey wool jacket which he had torn into strips at Les Tulettes. A deep red mark scored his chin, and he put his hand to it without appreciating the lively pain that it gave him. The high road was deserted; he only passed one cart coming lazily down a hill. The carter, who was asleep, did not answer the friendly "good-night" that he gave him. It was at Viorne Bridge that the rain overtook him. As he didn't like water he dropped down under the bridge for shelter, grumbling; it was intolerable, he said, there was nothing so bad for spoiling clothes, and if he had known he would have brought an umbrella with him. He waited a good half-hour, listening to the rain streaming down; then, when the shower was over, he took again to the road and at last walked into Plassans. He was extremely careful not to tread in any puddles.

It was now near midnight. Mouret was thinking that eight could not have struck yet. He walked through the empty streets, annoyed at the thought that all this time his wife was kept waiting.

"She'll be wondering what it all means," he thought. "The dinner will be cold. Ha! and a nice reception I'll get from Rose!"

Now he had reached Balande Street; he was standing at his front door.

"There now!" he said. "I haven't got my door key."

However, he didn't knock. The kitchen window was dark, and all the other windows in front seemed just as dead. Deep suspicion seized on the madman; with an animal instinct, he sensed danger. He stepped back into the shadow of the next-door house and again examined the front; then he seemed to decide what to do; he went round by Chevillottes Lane. But the little door into the garden was bolted. So then, with tremendous strength, in a sudden fit of anger, he hurled himself at the door which split in two, being riven with damp. The violence of the crash left him dazed, and, forgetting

why he had broken the door, he tried to patch it up with the scattered pieces. He was sorry now for what he had done.

"A nice trick, when it was so easy to knock!" he muttered. "A new door will cost me at least thirty francs."

He was in the garden. Looking up at the first floor, he saw that the bedroom windows were brightly lit, and thought that his wife was going to bed. This astonished him greatly. No doubt he had fallen asleep under the bridge while waiting for the rain to stop. It must be quite late. Sure enough, the next-door windows, both Monsieur Rastoin's and the sub-prefect's, were all dark. Then as he looked back to his own house, he saw the gleam of a lamp on the second floor, behind the thick curtains in Abbé Faujas' room. It was like a flaming eye shining in the forehead of the house, and it burned him. He pressed his hot hands to his brow; his head was in a whirl now with some hateful recollection, some half-forgotten nightmare dimly perceived, fraught with ancient peril threatening him and his family, growing slowly and looming terribly, a gulf into which the house would fall unless he saved it.

"Marthe, Marthe, where are you?" he called in a low broken voice. "Come to me, bring the children."

He looked for Marthe in the garden. But he no longer recognized his garden. It seemed larger to him, and empty and grey, like a graveyard. The box bushes had all gone, the lettuces were not there, the fruit-trees seemed to have moved. He turned back and went down on his knees to see whether by chance the slugs had eaten everything. The box edging especially, the loss of the high green bushes, affected him deeply, like the death of a living part of the house. Who then had killed his box bushes? What scythe had swept and cut all down, destroying even the clumps of violets that he had planted under the terrace? He began growling to himself at the devastation he saw.

"Marthe, Marthe, where are you?" he called again.

He looked for her in the little green-house to the right of the terrace. Inside, the green-house was stacked with the dead bodies of his tall box bushes. They lay piled in bundles, among branches from the fruit-trees, a scattering of several limbs. In one corner Désirée's bird-cage was hanging on a nail, in a deplorable state—the door broken, and bristling wires sticking out. The madman moved back in alarm, as if he had opened the door into some abandoned cellar. Stammering, the blood rising in his throat, he roamed along the terrace past the closed windows and doors. The

anger swelling in him gave his limbs the light quick movements of an animal. He crouched as he walked along noiselessly, looking for some opening. The window-light in the cellar gave him what he wanted. He made himself small, slipped through with cat-like skill, clawing with his finger-nails on the wall. At last he was in the house.

The cellar door was only latched. He moved into the dense darkness in the hall, feeling along the walls, and pushed the door of the kitchen open. The matches were on the left, on a shelf. He went straight to this shelf, struck a match, light enough for his hand to take the lamp on the mantelpiece without knocking anything over. Then he looked round. There must have been some big feast here that evening. The disorder in the kitchen spoke of celebrations; plates, dishes and dirty glasses loaded the table; a clutter of saucepans, still warm, lay around on the sink, on chairs, on the tiled floor; a coffee pot, forgotten on the edge of a lighted stove, was boiling, flaunting its paunch like a drunkard. Mouret moved the coffee-pot away, tidied the saucepans; he smelt them, sniffed the liquor dregs in the glasses, counted up the dishes and plates with growing irritation. This was not the cold clean kitchen of a decent retired tradesman; enough food lay spoilt there to feed a whole inn; this gorging mess reeked of gluttony.

"Marthe! Marthe!" he called again as he came back into the hall, lamp in hand. "Answer me! Tell me where they have shut you in? We must leave, leave at once."

He looked for her in the dining-room. The two cupboards to right and left of the stove were open; on the front of a shelf a brown paper-bag, broken open, was dripping lumps of sugar down to the floor. Higher up he saw a bottle of brandy with its neck gone, stopped with a wad of cloth. He got up on to a chair to go through the cupboards. They were half-empty; the jars of fruit preserved in brandy had all been dipped into, jam-pots were opened and sucked, the fruit was nibbled, food of all kinds gnawed and spoiled as though a host of rats had been that way. As there was no trace of Marthe in the cupboards, he looked everywhere, behind the curtains, under the table; bones were lying there among bread-crumbs and crusts, bottoms of glasses had left little rings of syrup on the oil-cloth. Then he stepped across the corridor and looked for her in the drawing-room. But he stopped short at the door: he could not recognize this room. The pale mauve wallpaper, the carpet with its red flowers, the new armchairs covered in

cherry-coloured damask astonished him greatly. He did not like to go in to someone else's room; he shut the door.

"Marthe! Marthe!" Still he called brokenly in his despair. He came back now to the middle of the hall and stood thinking, scarcely able to repress the hoarse cries choking his throat. Where was he, then, as he couldn't recognize any room? Who, who had changed his house like this? *Memories dimly stirred*; all he could see was shadows gliding along the passage; first two black ones, poor, retiring, polite; then two others, grey and shifty, that went by cackling. He raised the lamp and the flame flickered wildly: the shadows grew and grew, shot along the walls, climbed the stair, filled the entire house, swallowed it up. Some foul thing, some ferment of decay brought in, had rotted the woodwork, rusted the iron, riven the walls. And then he heard sounds as if the house was crumbling away like damp plaster mouldering, like a lump of sugar dropped in warm water.

Then upstairs peals of laughter rang out brightly, and made his hair stand on end. He set the lamp on the ground and went up the stairs to look for Marthe; he went up on all fours, making no sound, as lightly and softly as a wolf. When he reached the first-floor landing, he crouched down outside the bedroom door. A ray of light was coming out under the door. Marthe must be going to bed.

"Oh, I say, what a lovely bed!" said Olympe's voice. "Look how I sink into their bed, Honoré; I'm in feathers up to the eyes."

She was laughing, sprawling and bouncing in the bed-clothes.

"If you want to know, ever since I've been here I've longed to sleep in the beddykins. Itching for it, I was. I never could see that gawk of a woman snuggling down in it without having an awful longing to throw her out and get in myself. Why, you're warm at once. I feel as though I was in cotton-wool."

Trouche, who had not yet gone to bed, was fiddling among the toilet flasks.

"She's got all sorts of scents," he muttered.

"Yes," Olympe went on, "as she isn't here, why shouldn't we enjoy the best room? There's no danger of her disturbing us; I bolted the door.—Honoré, you'll catch cold."

He was opening the drawers, fumbling among the linen.

"Here, put that on," he said, throwing a night-dress over to Olympe; "it's covered with lace. I've always dreamed of going to bed with a woman in lace. I'll take this red bandanna. Did you change the sheets?"

"Faith, no," she answered. "I didn't think of it; they're still clean. She's very dainty about herself, I don't mind her that way at all."

At last Trouche made a move to get into bed.

"I say," she cried, "bring the toddy and put it on the bedside table! We don't want to get up and walk for our drinks. There now, ducks, we're just like real house-owners."

They stretched out side by side, with the eiderdown up to their chins, basking in the gentle warmth.

"I certainly fed well this evening," Trouche murmured after a silence.

"And drank!" Olympe added with a laugh. "I'm just grand; everything's spinning round. But what's annoying is, we've still got mother on our back. She was awful today; I couldn't take one step in the house. There's not much point in the mistress of the house going away if mum stays here playing matron. It ruined my day."

"Isn't the priest thinking of going?" asked Trouche, after another silence. "If he's made a bishop, he'll have to leave us with the house."

"You can't tell," she answered grumpily. "P'raps mother's planning to hold on to it. And it would be so nice here, all by ourselves! I'd put Madame Mouret in my brother's room upstairs; I'd tell her it was healthier up there. Just pass me my glass, Honoré."

They both took a drink, then snuggled down again.

"Puh! it wouldn't be so easy to turn them out," replied Trouche; "still, we could have a try. My belief is, the priest would have moved out already, if he wasn't afraid that the dame might raise hell when she found herself left in the lurch. I'd rather like to try my hand with the dame; I'll tell her things, to get those two out."

He took another drink.

"Supposing I got sweet with her, eh, dearie?" he said in a lower voice.

"O-oh no!" giggled Olympe as if she was being tickled. "You're too old, you're not handsome enough. Not that I'd care, but she wouldn't look at you twice, that's certain. You leave it to me; I'll get to work on her. I'll give notice to mum and Ovid, since they're so nasty to us."

"Yes, and if you don't succeed," he said, dropping his voice, "I'll spread a story that the priest was found in bed with the dame. That will make such a row that he'll be forced to move."

Olympe sat up.

"Why," she said. "But that is a good idea! We'll start on that

one tomorrow. Another month, and the shanty is ours. Here, let me kiss you for thanks."

The idea brightened them considerably. They discussed how they would arrange the room; they would move the chest of drawers to another position and bring up two armchairs from the drawing-room. Their talk gradually became drowsier. Silence fell.

"Ah, so you're off now," said Olympe; "you're snoring with your eyes open. Let me get over on your side; I'd like to finish my novel. I'm not sleepy yet."

She got up, rolled him over like a log to the side near the wall and began to read. But she was still at the first page when she turned her head uneasily towards the door. She thought she could hear a curious sort of growling noise in the passage. Then she got angry.

"You know very well I don't like that sort of joke," she said, giving her husband a nudge. "Don't you play wolf. It sounds like a wolf at the door. You try it again if you think it's funny. Yes, you're really exasperating."

Then she plunged again into her novel, in a fury, after taking a suck at the lemon-slice in her toddy.

Mouret moved lightly away from the door where he had been crouching. He went up to the second floor, knelt down outside Abbé Faujas' door, raising himself to the level of the keyhole. He gulped down the name of Marthe in his throat, and with burning eye probed into the corners of the room to make sure she was not hidden there. The large bare room was full of shadows, a little lamp standing on the edge of the table let a tiny circle of light fall on the floor; the priest, who was writing, was only a dark blot in the centre of the yellow gleam. Having probed behind the chest of drawers and the curtains, Mouret's eye now paused at the iron bedstead on which the priest's hat lay, spreading out like a woman's hair. Marthe no doubt was in the bed. The Trouches had said so; she was sleeping there now. But he could see the cold bed with the neat bedclothes laid as smooth and white as a grave-stone. His eye was getting used to the shadows. Abbé Faujas must have caught some sound, for he looked towards the door. When the madman saw the priest's quiet face, his eyes went red, a slight trickle of foam appeared at the corners of his mouth; urgently restraining a howl, he moved away on all fours, down by the stairs and by the passages, still calling in a low voice:

"Marthe! Marthe!"

He hunted for her through all the house; in Rose's room, which he found empty, in the Trouchès' apartment, filled with furniture brought in from elsewhere; in the children's old rooms, where he sobbed as his hand encountered a pair of little down-at-heel shoes once worn by Désirée. Upstairs he went and down, clinging to the banisters, gliding along the walls, groping his way into every room without bumping into anything, using all the extraordinary agility of the madman on his guard. Soon no corner was left from cellar to loft where he had not scented. Marthe was not in the house, nor the children either, nor Rose. The house was empty, the house could fall.

Mouret sat down on the stairs, between the first and second floors. He checked the strong surge of breath which would keep heaving in his chest. He was waiting, hands clasped, back to the banisters, eyes wide open on the darkness, deep in the one thought in his mind. Patiently he nursed it. His senses were growing so sharp that they could catch the least sound in the house. Below him, Trouche was snoring; Olympe was turning the pages of her novel with the light rustle of her finger on the pages. On the second floor, the scratch of Abbé Faujas' pen was as light as an insect's legs, while in the next room the priest's mother seemed to accompany this thin music with her firm breathing. One hour Mouret spent in this way with ears on the alert. Olympe was the first to succumb to sleep; he heard her novel drop to the floor. Then Abbé Faujas put down his pen, undressed with a discreet shuffle of slippers; his clothes slid softly, the bed did not even creak. Everyone in the house was in bed. But the madman knew that the priest was not sleeping yet; his breath was too light. Gradually the breathing grew stronger. Everyone was now asleep.

Mouret waited another half-hour. He still went on listening very carefully, as though he might hear the four sleepers in the house sinking down, by ever heavier degrees, into the oblivion of deepest sleep. Now the whole house was yielding under the weight of darkness. So then he rose, went slowly down to the hall. He grumbled: "Marthe's gone, the house has gone, all's gone."

He opened the door into the garden and went down to the little green-house. There he methodically removed the long dry box bushes; he carried away great armfuls, brought them upstairs and stacked them outside the bedroom doors of the first and second both landings. Then, seized with a desire for greater activity, he went to the kitchen, lit all the tables in the rooms, on the

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He opened the door into the garden and went down to the little green-house. There he methodically removed the long dry box bushes; he carried away great armfuls, brought them upstairs and stacked them outside the bedroom doors of the four sleepers on both landings. Then, seized with a desire for great brightness, he went to the kitchen, lit all the lamps, took and set them on the tables in the rooms, on the landings, along the passages. Then he

carried up the rest of the box faggots. The piles were rising higher than the doors. But then, on his last journey, his eye noticed the windows. So he went back, fetched the fruit tree branches and built a bonfire under the windows, cunningly—arranging for a strong draught to make good flames. But the bonfire seemed small to him.

"It's all gone," he said again; "it must all go."

He remembered, went down to the cellar, began his journeys again. Now he was bringing up all the wood stored for the winter, coal, stems and logs. The bonfire under the windows was becoming a pyre. Every load of little branches that he laid neatly on gave him a keener quiver of joy. Then he scattered kindling through the ground floor rooms, made a heap in the hall, another in the kitchen. Finally he tipped the furniture over, dragged and placed it on top. One hour had sufficed for all this labour. With his arms loaded, he had run, glided in stockinged feet here, there and everywhere, carried everything so well that he had not dropped one log too loudly. He seemed to be endowed with new life, with an extraordinary precision of movement. His fixed idea had made him very strong, very intelligent.

When all was ready, he paused a moment to enjoy the results of his labour. From pile to pile he passed, taking pleasure in the trim square shape of his pyres, going round each one and clapping his hands together softly with an air of extreme satisfaction. A few pieces of coal had dropped on the stairs; he ran and fetched a broom, neatly removed the black dust from the steps. So he completed his inspection, like a careful property-owner who likes to do things as they should be done, in a thoughtful manner. His enjoyment gradually alarmed him, he bent low, dropped again on all fours, running along on his hands, panting louder with a terrible outrush of his joy.

And then he took a dry branch. He set light to the piles. He began with the piles on the terrace, under the windows. One leap and he was indoors, setting light to the piles in the drawing-room and dining-room, in the kitchen and the hall. Then up he flew from floor to floor, throwing pieces of his burning branch on the heaps blocking the doors of the Troupes and the Faujas. He quivered with a growing fury, the bright light from the fires was driving him to frenzy. With tremendous leaps he bounded twice down the staircase, span round, darted through the thick smoke, blowing on the young flames, throwing handfuls of red coals on to the pyres. The sight of the flames already thrusting at the ceilings in the rooms

made him squat down for a moment, and he laughed and clapped wildly with his hands.

And now the whole house was beginning to roar like an over-charged stove. The fire was blazing at every point at once, so furiously that it was bursting through the floors. The madman went up the stairs again, passing through sheets of flame, singeing his hair and scorching his clothes. He took up a position on the second floor, crouching with fists to the ground; his eyes were fixed on the priest's door.

"Ovid! Ovid!" came a fearful scream.

Madame Faujas' door had suddenly opened at the end of the passage, the flames burst into the room with a forest-like roar. The old woman appeared in the heart of the fire. Her hands were out, she brushed aside the flaming faggots, jumped into the passage and, still screaming desperately, with fists and feet hurled aside the fiery brands barring the way to her son's door. The madman had crouched lower, eyes alight, muttering continually.

"Wait for me, don't go down by the window!" she cried as she knocked on the door.

She had to break it in. The door was on fire and gave easily. Then she appeared again, holding her son in her arms. He had stayed to put on his cassock; he was choking and coughing, suffocated by the smoke.

"Listen, Ovid, I'll carry you clear," she rapped out. "Hold tight to my shoulders, cling to my hair if you feel yourself slipping. I'll see you through, now." She took him on her shoulders like a child, and this old peasant woman, this sublime mother, faithful unto death, did not waver under the crushing weight of this huge, limp, fainting man. She stamped out the embers with her bare feet, drove a way through the heat, beating the flames back with her open hand, so that not one should even touch him. Just as she reached the stairs, the madman, whom she had not seen, leapt on Abbé Faujas and wrenched him from her shoulders. His mournful howl rose to a yell as the fit seized him. He was pounding the priest, tearing him with his nails, strangling him.

"Marthe! Marthe!" he yelled.

And down the flaming staircase he rolled with the body, while Madame Faujas, sinking her teeth deep into his throat, drank his blood. The Troupes in their drunkenness were taken by the flames without a sigh. The house, gutted by the fire, was coming down in a whirling shower of sparks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DR. PORQUIER was out when Macquart called; it was not till half-past twelve that he hurried in. The whole household was still astir with the one exception of Rougon, who would not leave his bed; these emotional upsets killed him, he said. Félicité, still sitting at Marthe's bedside, rose to go and meet the doctor.

"Ah, dear doctor, we are very troubled," she said. "The poor child hasn't moved at all since we put her to bed here. Her hands are already cold; I've been holding them in my own, but it's no use."

Dr. Porquier looked carefully at Marthe's face; he did not examine her further but remained standing, lips pursed, and made a vague gesture with his hand.

"My dear Madame Rougon," he said, "you must be very brave." Félicité burst out sobbing.

"It's the end," he went on in a lower voice. "I have been expecting this sad event for a long time, as I will confess to you now. Poor Madame Mouret had both lungs affected, and consumption in her case was complicated by a nervous disease."

He sat down, retaining a professional smile at the corners of his mouth, the polite attitude of the well-bred doctor even in the presence of death.

"Don't give way to despair, don't make yourself ill, dear lady. The fatal end was foreseen, any event on any day might have hastened it. Poor Madame Mouret must have coughed when she was young, did she not? In my opinion she has been harbouring the germs of this disease for years. And latterly, in the last three years especially, consumption has been making alarming progress. And what piety! What fervour! It moved me to see her failing in such a saintly manner. Yes, alas, God's decrees are unfathomable! science is often powerless to help."

And as Madame Rougon still went on weeping, he abour

the gentlest consolations, insisted on her taking a lime-leaf infusion to calm her nerves.

"Now, please, please don't torment yourself," he kept saying. "I assure you that she no longer feels any pain; she will go on sleeping quietly like this and will only recover consciousness in her last moments. Moreover, I am not deserting you; I shall stay here, though nothing I can do is of any avail at present. I'm staying with you as a friend, dear lady, as a friend, do you understand?"

He settled down comfortably for the night in an armchair. Félicité became a little calmer. As Dr. Porquier had given her to understand that Marthe had only a few hours to live, she bethought herself of Serge and decided to send for him from the seminary, which was close at hand. When she asked Rose to go to the seminary, at first Rose refused.

"So you want to kill him too, the poor child!" she said. "It would be too much of a shock, waking him like that in the middle of the night to see his mother on her death-bed. No, I don't want to be his executioner."

Rose was still angry with her mistress. While Marthe lay dying, she had been moving round her bed in the worst of tempers, banging cups and hot water-jugs.

"What sense is there at all in what the mistress has done? No one's to blame for what she did, searching out death at her husband's door. And now all's confusion, she has set us all a-crying. No indeed, I won't have that boy jerked out of his sleep."

However, finally she did go to the seminary. Dr. Porquier had stretched out by the fire; with his eyes half closed, he still continued pouring out kind words for Madame Rougon. Light coughs, the first fatal signs, now were shaking Marthe.

Just then Uncle Macquart, who had not been seen for quite two hours, softly opened the door.

"Now where have you come from?" asked Félicité, taking him into a corner.

He answered that he had been to stable his horse and trap at the Three Pigeons Inn. But his eyes looked so sharp, and his air so diabolically sly that Félicité was again seized with all kinds of suspicions. She forgot her dying daughter, scenting some devilry which it concerned her probably to discover.

"You look as though you have been shadowing someone," she said, noticing his muddy trousers. "You're hiding something from me, Macquart. That's not right. We have always been kind to you."

"Oh, kind!" the uncle replied with his jeering laugh. "You're the one that says it. Rougon is an old swab; over that cornfield business, he wouldn't trust me, treated me like dirt. And where is Rougon? Coddling himself, he is; much he cares for the trouble one takes for the family."

The smile that went with these last words disturbed Félicité greatly. She looked straight at him.

"What trouble have you taken for the family?" she asked. "You'll hardly reproach me with bringing my poor Marthe back from Les Tuilettes, will you? Besides, I tell you again, all this looks very shady to me. I questioned Rose; apparently your idea was to bring Marthe straight here. I'm surprised also that you didn't knock louder at the Mourets' door. They would have opened for you. Not that I'm displeased at having the dear child with me; at least she will die among her own kith and kin, with none but friendly faces about her."

Uncle Macquart looked very surprised; he interrupted uneasily: "I thought you were on the best of terms with Abbé Faujas?"

She did not answer; she went to Marthe, whose breathing was becoming more laboured. When she came back, there was Macquart lifting the curtain, looking out into the night apparently, wiping the damp glass with his hand.

"Don't go back tomorrow before having a talk with me," she said. "I want to clear up all this."

"As you wish," he answered. "It's quite a problem, trying to please you. First you like people, then you don't. Well, much I care; I just go on, my own little road."

He was obviously very annoyed to discover that the Rougons were no longer in league with Abbé Faujas. He was drumming on the glass with his finger-tips, still gazing into the darkness. Just at this moment a great red glow lit the sky.

"What is that?" asked Félicité.

He opened the window and looked out.

"It looks like a fire," he said calmly. "Something's burning behind Government House."

The square below was filling with noise. A servant ran in very scared, saying that the mistress's daughter's house had caught fire. It was rumoured that the mistress's son-in-law, the one they had shut up, had been seen moving about in the garden with a burning branch. And the worst of it all was that there was little hope left of saving the tenants. Félicité turned round sharply, paused to think

a good moment longer, with her eyes fixed on Macquart. At last she understood.

"Now you faithfully promised," she said in an undertone, "to lie low when we settled you in your cottage at Les Tuilettes. And you lack for nothing, either; you're as good as a property-owner there. This is outrageous, do you hear? How much did Abbé Fenil give you to open the door for François?"

He flared up, but she silenced him. She seemed far more concerned about the consequences than indignant about the crime itself.

"And what a frightful scandal there would be if this came to light!" she hissed. "Have we ever denied you anything? We'll talk tomorrow, we'll look into this cornfield business you keep dinning in our ears. If my husband heard of such a thing, it would be the end of him."

Uncle Macquart could not repress a smile. He indignantly defended himself, swore he knew nothing about it, had no hand in anything. Then as the sky was reddening more and more and Dr. Poiquier had already gone downstairs, he went out of the room too, saying like someone eager not to miss a sight: "I must go and see."

It was Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies who had given the alarm. There had been a reception that evening in Government House, and as he was going to bed, a few minutes before one, he had noticed an unusual red glow on his bedroom ceiling. Going to the window, he was very surprised to see a large fire burning in the Mourets' garden, and a shadowy figure, whom at first he did not recognize, dancing in the middle of the smoke and waving a lighted branch. Almost immediately after, flames poured out through every door and window on the ground floor. The sub-prefect hurried into his trousers, called his man-servant and sent the porter off to rouse the firemen and police. Then, before repairing to the scene of the fire, he finished dressing and made sure at a mirror that his moustache was correct. He was the first to reach Balande Street, which was absolutely deserted; two cats were scurrying across the roadway.

"But they'll be roasted alive in there!" Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies at once thought. He was quite surprised to find the house all quiet on the street side; no flames were showing yet.

He hammered loudly at the door, but all he could hear was the sound of the fire roaring up the staircase. He then went and knocked at Monsieur Rastoil's door. Piercing screams could be heard within,

running feet, and doors banging; then a discreet call from the presiding judge:

"Aurélie, cover yourself properly!"

Monsieur Rastoil dashed out on to the pavement, followed by Madame Rastoil and their younger daughter, the one who was not yet married. In her haste Aurélie had merely flung an overcoat of her father's over her shoulders, which left her arms bare; she blushed quite red when she saw Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies.

"What a dreadful tragedy!" exclaimed the judge. "The whole place will burn down. My bedroom wall is already warm. The two houses are but one, if I may put it so. Ah, Monsieur Péqueur, I didn't even find time to remove the clocks. Help must be organized. One can't sacrifice all one's furniture in a matter of hours."

Madame Rastoil, lightly clad in a wrap, was bewailing her drawing-room suite, which had just been re-upholstered. Meanwhile, neighbours' heads were appearing at windows. The judge called them down and began moving the contents of his house; he took personal charge of the clocks, which he deposited on the opposite pavement. When the armchairs had been brought out of the drawing-room, he made his wife and daughter sit down in them, and the sub-prefect stood by the pair and spoke reassuringly:

"Calm yourself, ladies; the fire-engine will be here in a moment, the flames shall be attacked vigorously. I think I can promise that your house will be saved."

The window panes in Mouret's house were now breaking, flames shot out of the first floor and suddenly the street was lit up by the fire; it was as light as in daytime. A drum beat in the distance in Government Square, sounding the alarm. Men were running up, a bucket chain was forming but there was a shortage of buckets and still the fire-engine had not come. In the midst of all this excitement Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, still standing by the Rastoil ladies, was shouting orders at the top of his voice:

"Clear the way, there! The chain's too close; space out two feet between each man!"

Then turning to Aurélie and speaking softly, he went on:

"I'm very surprised that the fire-engine hasn't got here yet. It's a new one; they were just going to baptize it. Yet I sent my porter off at once; he must have gone to the police too."

The police arrived first; they kept back the crowd, which was growing in spite of the late hour. The sub-prefect had gone over in person to control the bucket chain, which was bulging under the

pressure of some lively spirits from the suburbs. St. Saturnin's little bell was ringing the tocsin with its cracked voice; a second drum was sounding the alarm more lazily, at the bottom of the street by the ramparts. At last the fire-engine arrived, with a jostling rattle of metal; the fifteen firemen of Plassans came up, running and puffing. But in spite of the intervention of Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, a good quarter of an hour went by before they could get the fire-engine to work.

"I tell you the piston's jammed!" furiously shouted the captain to the sub-prefect, who insisted that the nuts were screwed too tight.

When at last a jet shot up, the crowd gave a sigh of relief. By now the house was blazing from the ground up to the second story, like a huge torch. Water poured with a hiss into the furnace, while the flames, forking in great yellow tongues, shot higher and higher. Firemen had climbed up on to the roof of the judge's house and were knocking in tiles with their axes, to prevent the fire spreading.

"It's all up with the house," muttered Maquart, who was calmly standing, hands in pockets, on the pavement opposite and watching the fire's progress with lively interest.

By the gutter's edge a drawing-room gathering had formed in the open air. The armchairs were very conveniently set in a half-circle, as though to give a front-row view of the spectacle. Madame de Condamin and her husband had just arrived: they had hardly got home from Government House, they said, when they heard the alarm drumming. Monsieur de Bourdon, Monsieur Mallin, Dr. Porquier, Monsieur Delangre, with several members of the municipal council, had also hastened to the scene. They all were gathered round the poor Rastoil ladies, comforting them, and uttering loud expressions of pity among themselves. In the end the company assembled took seats on the chairs. And a conversation began. Within only ten paces off, the fire-engine went on puffing and the great blazing beams.

"Did you bring my watch, dear?" asked Madame Rastoil. "It was on the mantelpiece with the chain."

"Yes, yes, it's in my pocket," answered the judge who was unsteady on his feet with all the excitement. He was very puffy. "I've got the silver too. I would have had everything but the firemen refuse, they say it would be dangerous."

Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies was just at that time and looking at

"I assure you that your house is out of danger now," he said; "all precautions have been taken. You can go and put your silver back in your dining-room."

But Monsieur Rastoil would not part with his spoons and forks, which he had under his arm, rolled in a newspaper.

"All my doors are open," he muttered disconsolately; "the house is full of people whom I don't know; there's a hole in my roof which will cost me dear."

Madame de Condamin was plying the sub-prefect with questions. "But this is horrible!" she cried. "I thought the tenants had had time to get away! So there's no news of Abbé Faujas?"

"I knocked myself," said Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies; "no one answered. When the firemen arrived I had the door broken in; I ordered ladders to be run up to the windows. It was all useless. One of our brave policemen ventured into the hall, and he was very nearly asphyxiated."

"And so—Abbé Faujas? What a horrible death!" said the lovely Octavie with a shudder.

The ladies and gentlemen looked at each other, white-faced in the wavering brightness of the fire. Dr. Porquier explained that death by fire was perhaps not as painful as one might imagine.

"You're just seized," he said by way of conclusion; "it must be a matter of a few seconds. One should add that it also depends on the violence of the fire."

Monsieur de Condamin was counting up on his fingers.

"If Madame Mouret is with her parents, as they say, that still leaves four; Abbé Faujas, his mother, his sister and brother-in-law. A nice business!"

At this moment Madame Rastoil leaned over to speak in her husband's ear.

"Give me my watch," she whispered; "I don't feel easy. You keep fidgeting. You'll sit on it."

Then a voice called that the wind was blowing the sparks over towards Government House. Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies excused himself and darted off to cope with this fresh danger. Meanwhile Monsieur Delangre wanted one last effort to be made to rescue the victims. The captain of the firemen bluntly told him to go up the ladders himself if he thought there was a chance; never, he said, had he seen such a fire. The devil himself must have started that fire, to make the whole house burn like tinder at all points at once. The mayor, followed by a few volunteers, then went round to

Chevillottes Lane. Perhaps they could manage to get up on the garden side.

"It would be a fine sight if it wasn't all so sad," remarked Madame de Condamin, calmer now.

And indeed the fire was becoming a magnificent spectacle. Showers of sparks were shooting up in great blue flames; vivid red cores of fire showed through every gaping window, while in a heavy purple cloud the smoke rolled off lazily, like the smoke of Bengal flares in a firework display. The company of ladies and gentlemen huddled in the armchairs leaned on elbows, heads well forward and chins in air; moments of silence came, broken by odd remarks, when a whirl of stronger flames rushed up to the sky. Further away, in the dancing brightness which would suddenly light the sea of watching faces, the murmurs of the crowd swelled louder, with a rush of water, a confused hum of noises. And ten paces off, the fire-engine still maintained its regular pant-pant, the soft hiss from the hot water-nozzle.

"Just look at that third window on the second floor!" suddenly cried Monsieur Maffre in great excitement. "You can see quite clearly, on the left: there's a bed there, on fire; the curtains are yellow, they're burning like paper."

Monsieur Péqueur came back at a gentle trot to reassure the company. His arrival created quite a panic.

"The flames and sparks are indeed being carried by the wind in the direction of Government House," he said, "but they're dying in the air. There's no danger, the fire's under control."

"But, tell me," said Madame de Condamin, "is it known how the fire started?"

Monsieur de Bourdeu told them that the first thing he saw was heavy smoke pouring out of the kitchen. Monsieur Maffre maintained however that the flames had first appeared in a room on the first floor. The sub-prefect judiciously nodded his head and finally remarked in an undertone:

"The possibility of foul play cannot be ruled out, I feel. I have already ordered an enquiry to be made."

And he told them how he had seen a man starting the fire with a burning branch.

"Yes," Aurélie broke in, "I saw him too. It was Monsieur Mouret."

There was a sensation. Such a thing couldn't be! Monsieur Mouret escaping and setting fire to his own house, why,

frightful drama! Aurélie was bombarded with questions. She blushed, and her mother looked at her severely. It was not proper for a girl to be at her window every night.

"I assure you, I clearly recognized Monsieur Mouret," she said. "As I wasn't asleep, I got up, seeing a great light. Monsieur Mouret was dancing in the middle of the fire."

The sub-prefect confirmed it. "Just so, Miss Aurélie is quite right. I know now that it was the unfortunate man. He was such an alarming sight that I first was puzzled, though his face was not unfamiliar to me. Excuse me, this is very serious; I must go and give a few orders."

He went off again, leaving the company busily commenting on this awful happening, a landlord burning his own tenants. Monsieur de Bourdeu fumed about asylums; supervision in them was grossly inadequate. The truth was that Monsieur de Bourdeu was trembling at the thought that the prefecture promised him by Abbé Faujas had gone up in flames. "Madmen are full of resentment," Monsieur de Condamin briefly observed.

But this remark unsettled everyone. The conversation fell dead. The ladies shivered slightly, while the gentlemen exchanged very odd glances. The burning house had become twice as interesting, now that the company knew the hand that had made the fire. Eyes blinked now in exquisite terror as they stared into the inferno, reflecting on the tragedy that must have taken place within those walls.

"If Papa Mouret's in there, that makes five," Monsieur de Condamin added. But a chorus from the ladies silenced him; they called him an atrocious man.

Ever since the fire had begun, the Paloques, husband and wife, had been at their dining-room window, watching; they were just above the drawing-room improvised on the path. The judge's wife eventually came out and graciously offered hospitality to the Rastoil ladies and those standing round them.

"There's a good view from our windows, I promise you," she said. The ladies however declined.

"But you'll catch cold," she went on; "the night's quite chilly."

Madame de Condamin gave a smile, and stretched out her little feet, showing them below the hem of her skirt.

"Ah, yes! but we're not cold," she answered. "My feet are roasting. I'm very comfortable. Are you cold, Aurélie?"

"I'm too hot," Aurélie assured her. "It's like a summer's night. The fire's beautifully warming."

Everyone declared that they were very comfortable there, so Madame Paloque decided to stay and sit down in an armchair too. Monsieur Maffre had just gone off: he had spotted his two sons in the middle of the crowd, with Guillaume Porquier; all three had come to the fire, without ties, from a house by the ramparts. The police magistrate, positive that he had locked and double locked them into their bedroom, led Alphonse and Ambroise away by the ears.

"Supposing we went back to bed?" said Monsieur de Bourdeu, who was getting gloomier and gloomier.

Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies reappeared; he was tireless and not forgetful of the ladies, in spite of all the cares on his shoulders. He walked quickly to meet Monsieur Delangre, who was returning from Chevillottes Lane. They talked in low voices. The mayor must have witnessed some frightful scene; he kept passing his hand over his face, as if to banish from his eyes the awful picture haunting him. "We were too late! It's horrible, horrible!" He refused to answer any question.

"Only Bourdeu and Delangre regret the priest," Monsieur de Condamin whispered in Madame Paloque's ear.

"They had business on hand with him," she calmly replied. "Now look, there's Abbé Bourrette. He's crying in earnest."

Abbé Bourrette, who had been helping in the chain, was sobbing bitterly. The poor man wouldn't listen to comforting words; he simply refused to sit down in an armchair and remained standing with tear-dimmed eyes, watching the last beams burning. Abbé Surin had also been seen; but he had gone away after listening, among group after group, to the details passing round.

"Let's go to bed," Madame de Bourdeu said again. "It's really stupid to stay on here."

All the company rose. It was decided that Monsieur Rastoil and his wife and daughter should spend the rest of the night in the Palokes' house. Madame de Condamin was giving little taps to her skirt, which was slightly crumpled. The armchairs were pushed back, and everyone remained standing a moment, wishing each other goodnight. The fire-engine was still panting away, the fire was growing paler among billowing black smoke. All that could be heard was the shuffling feet of the crowd, moving away now, and the last few strokes of a fireman's axe chopping down a beam.

"That's the end," thought Macquart, who was still watching from the pavement across the road.

But he stayed a moment or two longer, listening to the last remarks passing in undertones between Monsieur de Condamin and Madame Paloque.

"Bah!" the judge's wife was saying, "no one's going to shed tears for him except that old silly, Bourrette. He was getting unbearable, we were all his slaves. The bishop must be laughing for joy. Good riddance for Plassans!"

"And the Rougons!" observed Monsieur de Condamin. "They must be delighted."

"Ah, the Rougons are in the seventh heaven. They'll be inheriting from the priest's admirer. Why, they would have paid handsomely for a bold hand to set fire to this place."

Macquart walked away feeling very displeased. He feared now that he had been a mere tool. The delight of the Rougons was a nasty shock. The Rougons were sly ones, always playing a double game, so in the end it was you they robbed. As he walked across Government Square he swore that he would never do a job that way again, in the dark.

As he was going up to the room where Marthe lay dying, he found Rose sitting on the stairs. She was in a fearful temper and grumbling away to herself:

"No indeed, I won't stay in that room; I refuse to see such things. Let her die without me! Let her die like a dog! I don't love her now, I don't love anyone. To go and fetch the lad out like that, make him come to see the end! And I agreed! I shall never forgive myself. He was as white as his shirt, the cherub. I almost had to carry him from the seminary. I thought he was going to give up the ghost on the way, he was crying so. Ah, it's pitiful. And now he's up there with his arms round her. It makes my flesh creep. If only the house would fall on our heads, and end it all quickly. No, I shall go away, hide myself in a hole, live all alone, never see anybody again, never, never! The whole of life is made for weeping and falling in tempers!"

Macquart entered the chamber. Madame Rougon was kneeling, hiding her face in her hands, while Serge stood by the bedside, his cheeks streaming with tears, supporting the head of the dying Marthe. She had not yet recovered consciousness. The last gleams from the fire lit the room with a red reflection.

A fit of coughing shook Marthe. She opened her eyes in surprise, sat up to look about her. Then she clasped her hands in unspeakable terror and expired. Her eyes had seen Serge's cassock in the red light.

